n, English

No. 155] APPLETONS' [50 cts.

TOWN AND COUNTRY LIBRARY

ISHED SEMI-MONTHLY NOVEMBER 15, 1894 $10.00 PER ANNUM

CHILDREN OF CIRCUMSTANCE

A Novel

BY IOTA

AUTHOR OF "A YELLOW ASTER"

ENTERED AT THE POST-OFFICE AT NEW YORK AS SECOND-CLASS MAIL MATTER.

D. APPLETON & CO., NEW YORK

CHILDREN OF CIRCUMSTANCE

A NOVEL

BY

"IOTA"

AUTHOR OF A YELLOW ASTER

[MRS. MANNINGTON CAFFYN.]

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1894

CHILDREN OF CIRCUMSTANCE.

CHAPTER I.

"SHAKESPERE!" said Miss Julia in an awed whisper, touching the little red book timidly.

"Shakespere!" repeated her sister, neither with awe, however, nor in a whisper.

"How did she get the book?" said Miss Julia, half to herself, still fingering it with vague unrest.

"That I don't know. I only know that, in spite of all our care, in spite of our prayers in season and out of season, in spite of our years of striving with the Lord on her behalf, our unhappy niece has deceived us, has chosen to forsake the paths of righteousness and to dwell in the tents of the Philistines."

She looked grimly out through the window and tightened her grey lips in a long stony silence.

The two women who sat in that room were careworn, sorrowful, dull-eyed creatures—a poor pair of types chosen by Fate in a captious mood wherewith to play tricks, thereby impishly to spite Nature.

Nature had bestowed on them certain alleviations common to their kind, that she meant should grow in them and multiply, thus leavening the mass; whereupon the imp Fate went cheerily to work, caught and coerced those pleasing instincts, nipped them with frost, scorched them with heat, forced them into strange channels, there to work woe. It was an unequal contest, and Fate, coupled with temperament, won, hands down.

As soon as the elder woman arrived at a consciousness

of these matters, she found there was that in her which would shut her out always from her rightful heritage. She had not lost her kingdom—she had never so much as entered into it ; nor could she hug to her breast the poor consolation of railing against opportunity, which her kind so frequently and so patiently clings to. Opportunity had in no sort of way treated her scurvily. It was she herself who had been to blame, she had been her own flaming sword, shutting herself out of Paradise.

Oddly enough, she knew, by some mysterious inner prompting, that it was Paradise from which she was shut out.

From her girlhood she had wondered and wondered what this Paradise was like, and as she wondered, its vague glories had become intensified.

She was now six-and-fifty, and in the silence and the darkness of the night watches she still wondered.

In the years, that wonder had grown less vague, and had clothed itself with words. What was it to be admired, hoped for, waited—watched for ? What was it, what did it feel like, to make one human heart beat faster at your approach, one human soul feel better in your presence ? She would put out her withered hand on the white quilt, and sigh over its swollen veins—the joints that gout had touched—and wish she could recall, ay, or even feebly comprehend, the touch of some other hand, the soft warm shock of some kiss.

Night after night, year in, year out, the woman wondered, envying young hearts their foolish dreaming, even their bitter sorrows ; for were not the dreams and the sorrows both learned within the gates of Paradise ? whereas she still stood at the other side, cold, and hard, and pitiless, with this great, wondering longing.

Miss Julia had been more fortunate, for once in the old lean past, before she became "converted," and when the fleeting joy of being young had lent a brief charm to her colourless face, her heart had been moved and stirred by a young man. He was, as a matter of fact, considerably less

than a mere curate, and he forsook her directly he found a larger fortune, (and features promising better wear,) ready to yield to his pulpit oratory ; but being to Julia the embodiment of all good, he served a good purpose.

He gave her one little glimpse into the heart of life, and so helped to save her soul alive.

On both these women, unhelped of illusions with Miss Julia's one small clerical exception, the petty cares of life weighed sadly. They could not, like completer natures, march boldly past and over them, burying them as they went ; they lingered with them, carving their faces with cruel crow's feet.

The room they sat in, their favourite in all the big Queen Anne's house, was suggestive of their modes of thought. Although the furnishing was good, and the carpet and curtains rich and heavy, there was no ornament in that room worth the name, no cat, or dog, or litter of paper, or any other symptoms of human weakness.

If an ordinary mortal, with original sin still thick upon him, were to enter it, his eyes would grow heavy and his breath would come quickly, and before he had been in the place five minutes he would feel as he had felt on the verge of his last flogging, that awful silent moment allowed for grace before meat.

And so those two joyless persons, units of a joyless creed —they were Plymouth Brethren, of that closer connection which with commendable humility styles itself "*The* Brethren"—sat together this sweet May day, and discussed two sinners—William Shakespere, dead, and Margaret Dering, quick.

Miss Dering had just made a painful discovery. She had been cruising round the premises, in search of domestic faults of omission and commission—a favourite occupation of hers, when not engaged in pursuits even more intimately connected with religion. She had found her niece Margaret's room rather worse than usual, and as she had pounced on an end of string hanging slatternly from a drawer, she jerked the drawer out with it, and exposed to view a hope-

less muddle, and on the top glaring out in all its brazen godlessness, a red morocco Shakespere.

She stood aghast: the sight of a play-acting book, pronounced accursed by her school, filled her with unnamable terrors. Her knees shook and her back fell together; and this, with as iron-spined a person as Miss Dering, was a considerable concession of muscle to emotion.

When the power for action had returned, she threw herself forward on her knees, and abased herself before her fetish, deprecating his wrath from falling too heavily on the young sinner's head; at the same time bewailing, in no measured terms, the judgment that this same fetish had—rather unreasonably—seen fit to impose on her mature and irreproachable years, in the person of the said sinner.

Then she rose, composed her features, straightened herself, and descending to the library, laid the book before Miss Julia, who gazed at it in silence to the dropping of tears.

"Perhaps," she said at last, "perhaps she has not read the book."

Miss Dering whipped open the pages, and displayed the margins scribbled over with notes in Margaret's handwriting.

"Not only has she read it, but, seemingly, she has read it with understanding."

This was depressing testimony, but it had not an altogether silencing effect on Miss Julia. A little whiff of the daffodil-laden air, full of spring hankerings, had crept in, and was freshening up the old love in Miss Julia's heart. She would—she would stand by the young creature; but oh! if her fears did not so beset her!

Suddenly a happy idea came to her.

"Katherine," said she, in a low, meek voice, "suppose"—she gasped almost inaudibly; she had pushed the old ring up against the middle joint of her finger, and the thought of the big chalky lump (for gout had also touched her) struck her like pain—"suppose we read together a portion from the volume before we finally condemn our niece? *Our* foundations of faith are fixed and sure, and, at *our* age,

we are no longer likely to be led away by the lusts of the flesh."

She choked down a little sigh as she said this, and a fresh tear ran down the little red furrow by the side of her long, melancholy nose. She looked a mere withered, bent old maid, and rather ridiculous; but there was a drop of burning bitterness in the confession that made her akin with us all, but that none of us will quite understand or pity until the day shall come when her confession will also be ours.

Dear God! how cruel-sweet they are, these lusts of the flesh, and in what curious corners they lurk!

Miss Julia's motion was carried; the sisters agreed to judge for themselves as to how far their school was justified in pronouncing this book accursed. They would, at the same time, arrive at some idea as to the amount of taint incurred by the unhappy Margaret; possibly also, guided by faith, they might gather some suggestions as to her more effectual cleansing.

Miss Julia murmured some sentiments to this effect in half tones; most of her chosen organs containing tongues of fire and solemn rebuke for sinners, she could not entirely disabuse her mind of hope.

Possibly it was a phase of flesh weakness to sanction the proceedings. Miss Dering felt a twinge as she buckled up her reins to judgment; but though strong in anathema and all other religious exercises, she was, after all, a daughter of Eve, and tarred with Eve's tar-brush.

They opened—oh irony of Fate!—they opened on *Romeo and Juliet!*

"*You* had better read," said Miss Dering, as she settled herself bolt upright on a chair, her silk skirts rustling snappishly.

Miss Julia polished her glasses, and, with a sort of gentle, suppressed excitement, glanced nervously heavenward, with a half-apologetic prayer for a blessing on the word.

The movement, in connection with a presumably impious book, being without precedent, Miss Dering, who considered her privilege of taking the initiative as interfered with, re-

fused her sanction to the measure by withholding the Amen, which it was her usual custom on such occasions to pronounce, with an air of encouragement that must have seemed strange to her Maker.

Miss Julia felt crushed by the implied snub; consequently her rendering of her subject was at first plaintive and bleating in the extreme; but as she read on, in spite of herself she grew interested; a ring of pleasure came into her jaded voice, an echo of freshness into her worn face, a flicker of morning light into her twilit eyes.

What she read was so different, so strangely and alluringly different, from the sanctioned tracts and books of devotion she dwelt amongst, and absorbed with a patience that was divine.

But her sister, whose astuter intelligence scented the cloven hoof afar off, grew restless; threw up her hands once or twice, and widened her nostrils, to catch the first absolutely tangible whiff of the devil. She was a just woman, and scrupled to judge him in advance.

As the story grew, and the light conduct and slipshod sentiments of Romeo and the company he kept became quite glaringly apparent, while all the time Miss Julia read on with a most extraordinary air of refreshment and consolation, her sister began to think that the danger was even closer home than she had suspected; she snorted, and cast a withering glance at Julia, who took not the slightest notice, but pattered on in an absorbment of mild delight.

Miss Dering rose up and paced the room, keeping herself in subjection until all her weapons were to hand—taking care, meanwhile, to lose no word of this man's invention. Satan's spokesman or not, she had her duty to consider.

But when at last Romeo and the young woman set to making shameless, unmistakable love—more shameless even for her awful envy of it—under the disreputable light of the moon, and when a faded old blush flitted from out some musty store-closet up into Miss Julia's thin cheek, then Miss Dering's wrath burst its bonds.

She bore down on the other woman, seized the book, and

having administered to her a faithful and strongly-worded rebuke, she fell to sum up the character and achievements of our dearest William in a style that would have astonished, while solemnly enlightening, a Shakespere Society. Now and again, in her freedom from conventional taste, and in her lofty disregard of the opinion of an imbecile majority, Miss Dering rose to something like sublimity.

Having got Shakespere off her mind, and feeling a satisfactory sense of having done her duty by the dead sinner, she proceeded to consider her duty to the living.

As she cast about in her mind how she might best combine pain with repentance, she lost her fleeting touch of sublimity and grew commonplace and spiteful. To give her her due, however, she had wrestled very frequently with the Lord over her niece Margaret, and seemingly but to little purpose; so perhaps it was small wonder that, all unconfessed to herself, the exercise had grown to pall, and that she found herself impelled to abandon, in this instance, the idea of heavenly interposition, and to resort to direct dealing with the individual.

When she sat herself down to consider, the ready tears gathered in Miss Julia's eyes, for she had caught sight in her sister's of a gleam she knew well, and she shook in her shoes as she watched her.

Presently she relapsed into a carnal reverie, called up to her simple soul by the words she had been reading, and that she would have given more than she had words to express to be able to dismiss with the prompt impartiality of her elder.

While she thought, Miss Dering acted. She had put a light to the fire, laid ready for lighting, and she had just cast into it the little red book, and was now standing above it with a half smile on her lips, when Miss Julia came to herself in a rush. Strengthened by her brief revelation of a bliss outside of the spirit, she felt ready even to face Katherine, and she had already broken forth into a protest, when the words were caught in her throat, and she stood paralysed, listening in a sort of dumb, scared terror to the rush of a pair of swift, impatient feet up the steps.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN, a few minutes later, Margaret Dering came into the library to announce the fact that tea was getting stone-cold in the drawing-room, her aunts, grown used to her though they were, were positively startled at the ridiculous, abandoned, incomprehensible happiness of her face.

This look of, so to speak, Pagan happiness was the girl's most notable feature. It arrested and interested every one who caught stray glimpses of her in the village and the lanes, or in church—whenever she could escape the gruesome dulness of her aunts' meeting-house,—a conventicle they had themselves built and endowed.

It also amazed and astonished those who knew her surroundings, which were not even of late growth; they had encompassed her ever since she had come, a seven-years-old child, to live with her aunts. Since then, she had been nursed, fed, and taught by The Brethren, and had been given mostly stones for bread. Yet in spite of everything, even of the clothes they put her into, she had the air of a personage, and retained it under the most sordid conditions.

This look about her cut both her aunts to the quick, and formed frequently the mainstay of their prayers; they described it as partaking of the devil—they really meant the flesh, but that was a word they rarely permitted themselves to use, considering it highly indelicate.

There were alleviations in Margaret's lot. She enjoyed, at odd times, a most extraordinary amount of liberty. She spent quite half her days in the open air, while her keepers prayed; and it was then that she drank in happiness with all other natural things—the sunlight, the birds, the beasts

and fishes, the flowers, the flowing waters, the shimmering dews.

Happiness such as hers was rare as it was terrible in its loneliness, its uncompromising selfishness, its absolute aloofness from all human interest.

There was, however, a new element in it this day, that irritated the elder woman, and frightened both of them, for it revealed to them the presence of a mystery, yet gave them no clue to its understanding.

To their dying day neither of them forgot that new look, or ceased to be hurt by their incapacity to understand it.

One glance at her aunt's face told Margaret clearly enough that a quite exceptionally severe tempest was about to break over her. A vile smell of burnt leather gave her an insight into the situation. She darted to the fireplace, and recognised her most treasured possession, her shrivelling, smouldering Shakespere. She seized Miss Dering's best silver-handled pen from the table, and poked her book out of the smoky flames with it, and then she faced her aunts, stiff with wrath, and with her eyes blazing, holding her Shakespere at arm's length dangling on the pen.

She had borne considerably worse things than this in her time with a sort of mocking patience, knowing that there was no escape from her toils until her majority should sever them. Under ordinary circumstances she would have cast a look of supreme scorn on Miss Julia, and of unutterable aloof indifference on Miss Dering, and have marched off with her smouldering volume with that air of radiant victory in the face of defeat which always drove Miss Dering to praying, else she could not possibly have kept her hands off the girl.

But to-day she was no longer an insolent young victim of Fate, singing out her life in spite of it. She was a girl, feeling in her the budding of womanhood; she was a mass of throbbing nerve-centres, with a whole host of new sensations running riot in her. She was experiencing strange things, and was drunken with the glamour of them.

Under the circumstances it was hardly to be wondered at

that her stiffness soon left her, and her dumb wrath gave place to audible raging. When she had expended herself somewhat, she grew calmer, and in the sweetest, softest gutturals had time to be nasty.

"Upon my word," she said, "I did my best to like you both; and when that was quite out of the question I tried very hard to—to respect you. Of course I can no longer do either. How any well-born, well bred woman could pry into one's drawers and burn one's property, in the interests of morality, is absolutely beyond me!" She paused and contemplated the weeping Julia. "For goodness' sake, don't cry," she continued, "it's so very wearying to watch you. You can't help it," she said consolingly, "you're weak, you poor thing! and," she added as an after thought, lifting her eyebrows, "a fool. Why, if you feel it so keenly, why on earth don't you pluck up spirit and resist her?"

She looked from her height of five feet seven inches down on Miss Julia with much contempt and a little lordly pity. Somehow she felt, just that instant, so infinitely more complete than either of the two women, and of so very much more account. She was astonished at her attitude towards them. She could not place the position in the least. She had not an idea that she had just reached the crest of her womanhood, and that, on the contrary, they, before ever they had reached theirs, had fallen back, tired of hoping, into the trough of failures, and were still struggling coldly in the dull waters.

Possibly, if she had had one little glimmer of the truth, she might not have been so cruel; however, it is hard to say. Sweet eighteen has often a vixen's heart, except where a man is concerned.

"Have you never felt any love for any one, or the need of any for youself?" Margaret demanded, with a certain inconsequence, glaring at her elder aunt, who, to her amazement, held her tongue and trembled visibly, dropping her eyes to hide their poor secret.

She no need for love, nor desire for it! "O God!" Miss Dering moaned with cracking heart. Then she crushed her

secret into its nest, raised her eyes, and proceeded to shrieking vituperation. When at last she fell short of matter, she lifted her hands, shook her fingers with a half-prayerful, half-maledictory motion, and rasped out,—

"Go from my sight! Go — and may God help you!"

"I hope to goodness He will, there seems so little chance of any one else's doing it!" A sudden, odd, earnest look leaped into her eyes, and turned them from grey to black. She wheeled round and looked at Miss Dering. "I think," she said, "you're after all a coward! You shirk your responsibilities. I was given into your hands that you might love and help me. You do neither. You throw me at God, and tell Him to do your work. I see you're arranging yourself in a praying pose; but you're not going to pray. Do you know what you're going to do?—just to do your best to poison God's mind against me. It's curious you should know so little about yourself or about me."

"Blasphemous — deceitful — abandoned, — the Lord's wrath!" broke from Miss Dering in random, half-audible gasps.

Margaret stopped as she was walking off, and, according to a curious custom of hers, turned and examined her aunts in an impersonal sort of way. After a minute's pause she observed musingly to herself,—

"I wonder what on earth the Lord—the real One I mean, not the one of your own making—must think of you, or even why He made you? Why could He not have been content with an evil instrument to work evil, without producing a presumably good one? Aunt Julia, too—she was probably designed for a mute, only that her sex came in the way. The world seems studded with square pegs in round holes."

Miss Dering had meanwhile dropped on her knees, but, catching sight of her niece hanging round the door with an absent air of interest, she shook her fist at her, and, averting her eyes, begged the Lord for strength to stand it all; and Margaret, when she had locked up the remains of her book,

went to the drawing-room, poured out some tea, and helped herself to cake.

"What in the world made me break out in this manner?" she wondered with a qualm. She knew they were safe in the library for a good half-hour. "It's insane to fly in the face of one's relations, and one's fate, and Providence all at once; and, after all, one can be happy, in spite of them. But, oh! my poor book, my comfort and consolation! I wonder if he'll give me another?" she murmured, and such an enchanting little smile broke out round her mouth that one would have sworn that only a most tender heart could have produced it. "If he doesn't, what shall I do? There are none in the village, and if I write to town they'll discover me. It really does seem hard on a truth-loving person to have to act lies, and hide her possessions; but must I choke and gasp and die of hunger and thirst because they're blind themselves, or so empty? If only they had the merest glimmering notion of the lovely, delicious, unutterable things I know, of the friends I live among—of ——" She flushed scarlet. "Oh, all the wretches possessed of devils in all the Bibles in the world rolled into one would be a fool to me!"

Her words were violent enough, but she felt in so soft and faltering a mood that she wondered rather if it could be a headache coming on—never having had one, she couldn't argue from experience. The feeling somehow enlarged her sympathies. She tasted her tea.

"It's perfectly cold," she said; "I'll get Hannah to make some fresh, and to insist on their leaving prayer and drinking it."

Half an hour later she was down at the trout stream, singing a low gurgling tune of delight, and wondering if he would come.

CHAPTER III.

UNDER the circumstances, it would have been extremely desirable if he had not come, either then or at any other time. For by nature and occupation he was an honest man —and married.

But he was also twenty-four, and he had played his hand of life very nearly as badly as a man can play it. He had married before he knew anything of love, life, women, —least of all, of himself.

When he had come from Eton to Oxford, a wholesome, active-bodied, active-minded boy, he had given way to his natural and hereditary tendencies, and plunged into sport of all descriptions, troubling his head very little about any other worlds. He was supposed to be a man who could do anything that he set his mind to do, so out of sheer good-heartedness to his betters he did now and then put his shoulder to the wheel, in order that their opinion of him might be justified; for if there was one thing he hated more than another it was making other men appear ridiculous. The amount of "swatting" necessary to avert this catastrophe helped to keep him straight, as dons count straightness.

The year he left Oxford, he managed one day nearly to put an end to himself in the hunting field, and he was nursed back to life by a cousin—a fine, prim, cold abstraction, who, nevertheless, was human and under twenty; and while he was weak from loss of blood, and she from watching, they stumbled, so to speak, into a kiss, and somehow, in the sentimentality and intellectual feebleness of convalescence, a proposal followed hard on its heels.

When Hyde married, he was an honest, pleasant, kindly-

tempered lad, but, in spite of his good degree, singularly ignorant of many things in heaven and on earth, and more especially so of the complicated nature of a kiss.

An activity from which there was no escape, which would have kept him, body, soul, and spirit, always on tiptoe, was essential to the man's well-being. If he had been poor and unmarried, he would have drifted to the New Journalism and the regeneration of the world. Being rich and married, with no stomach for politics with an Ireland inextricably mixed into them, he drifted into mischief.

Unfortunately for himself, perhaps for both of them, his wife was quite over-weighted with the wisdom and knowledge which that hapless kiss had revealed to her. The two things she knew nothing about were, how to give out her love and how to compel his.

It was that palpitating, provoking, absolutely unreasonable joyousness of Margaret Dering's, and her astonishing air of distinction, considering the cut of her clothes, that had brought a singular alteration into Geoffrey Hyde's points of view, and was even changing for him his sense of colour, and his perception of sound.

Surely never before had the pink in the spots of a trout, or the yellow of the great king-cups by the stream's bank, or the blue of the forget-me-nots, half hidden under it, made his heart to swell with the delight of them. Surely this spring was the first time that he had listened with any sort of comprehending pleasure to the voices of birds, the whisper of insects, the rustle of leaves.

And with his awakened senses there came on him, as in a flood, a secure and pleasant consciousness of the dearness and nearness of God.

But he found that he was as colour-blind as ever, as hard of hearing with understanding, as he had been in his tenth year, when he proceeded to consider these things apart from Margaret Dering.

The yellow of the king-cups was only beautiful because it matched the little curly ends of her brown hair ; the blue of the forget-me-nots because sometimes there came blue

lights into her grey eyes; the pink in the trouts' spots because it was exactly the tint of the inner lining of her little ears; and in the songs of the birds, and the whispers of the insects, and the rustle of the leaves, there were tones that matched hers—therefore they were beautiful.

And God was good because He had made her. Qualms came upon him indeed when she was away from him, and then he made resolutions, meaning to keep them—till he saw her again, when he had an excellent excuse for himself always at hand; men mostly have, under all conditions.

"She was a mere chit of a child," he would think with glib insistency. Being a little off balance, and impervious to humour, it did not occur to him how odd it was that so very young a child should have created in him a whole philosophy with regard to one kiss—no given kiss, or even clearly-grasped conception of one, but a vague, rosy, floating vision of a lovely meeting of lips, whereby the whole world should be made better, and himself, in one and the same moment, should be cast kneeling in the dust, and exalted high among the gods.

Meanwhile, Margaret was sitting with her back to a rock and her face to the stream, softly singing, in a mist of happy inarticulate wonder, which is a young girl's substitute for thought, until sorrow, or necessity, has opened the doors of her understanding.

Presently she fancied she heard a rustle. She sat up alert, but doubtful. It came from the wrong place, it was too soft and quiet,—there was a subtle suggestion of evil in it; then, to her amazement, she saw a little slender gloved hand push aside a briar, and a minute afterwards a woman, a wonderful white creature, in a dress that took her breath away, stood before her, and looked at her, as if she could then and there have turned her inside out, had she not been far too proud and self-contained to think of taking such a liberty.

Margaret said a long "Oh!" and stood up. Her doing so was an involuntary "stoop of the spirit" to the majesty of the woman, and the build of her gown.

They stood and judged each other for a moment; then the elder one spoke, in a voice that under no circumstances could ever sound hot, much less angry; so extreme and fine-drawn was its culture that it sent a cold shiver down Margaret's back.

"I came," she said,—"I came to speak to you."

"Oh!" again said Margaret. She was just sufficiently recovered to say a short word without any visible quake. "How did you know where to find me?" She wanted to ask who her visitor was, but she did not feel equal to it, a look in the woman's eyes made her so cold and dumb.

"I knew quite well, I have often seen you. You were about to ask me who I was?" Margaret winced. "I am afraid," she went on very slowly,—"I am afraid you will not be pleased when you know. I am Mrs. Hyde, the wife of Geoffrey Hyde, whom you are now waiting for."

Margaret looked at her dazedly with knitted brows. What did she mean?

"The wife of Geoffrey Hyde!" she repeated. "I don't understand."

"Possibly not. It is, nevertheless, a fact."

The steely, low voice cut through the mists that enveloped Margaret's senses; she was fully awake now, and her first impulse was to pull herself together and to stand at bay in the face of a host of inexplicable dangers; then suddenly a choking, death-like feeling of helplessness, of inevitableness, slowed her blood. For the first time in her life the girl lost courage, and was conscious of the fact; and in her consternation at the loss she turned her eyes, full of defiant entreaty, on the other woman, who understood and had mercy—in her own fashion. She turned her face away and was silent. The little motion was like a blow in the face to Margaret; somehow, it put her in the wrong.

"She despises me," she thought. "How dare she! how dare she!"

She was dumb from the pain of her abasement. Then her insolent, hurt, unmellowed youth came to her aid; it poured into her heart the full consciousness, the signifi-

cance, of loving and being beloved ; it told her that the race was to her, the strong, the swift ; that she was the greater of the two ; that she had all that the other lacked, and should claim her rights. For the minute she felt that she could face earth and defy Heaven, and she was absolutely pitiless.

"You are Mrs. Hyde—Geoffrey Hyde's wife—and he loves me. He never told me so—you told me by coming here. And—I love him—I love him ! You told me that, too, by coming. Surely you have told me a great deal in a few minutes."

"Can you not understand—can you not see ? Have you no shame ? He is my husband. I only have the right——"

"But you have lost your right," said Margaret. "He was yours, yours altogether. You let him go from you. How dare you speak of shame to me ! It is only you who should be ashamed. Why did you let him come to me,—why ? Look at us together—we two ! I am nothing—nothing at all compared to you ; and yet he is no longer yours now, he is mine."

Mrs. Hyde's horror-stricken eyes fixed on her, showed her a new point of view. A spark of the truth flashed into her, and she got her first taste of the tree ; she was all at once ashamed—hateful to herself, and a sudden baffled, reproachful anger against the woman who had opened her eyes and brought to her the knowledge of shame took hold of her and shook her.

"You should never have let him come to me," she whispered, with bowed head ; "you should have made all this impossible. Now it is too late," she went on, with slow incision. The new sound in her own voice struck her with sharp pain, and she gave a short, dry sob. "Now it is too late—it has all been taken out of our hands : I love him and he loves me."

She looked at the other woman curiously.

"This is sin, then," she said ; "but if it is, I think it is your sin, not ours. Why didn't you love him ? How could

you possibly have helped loving him—seeing him, speaking to him, touching him, every hour of the day? And he kissed you, too, perhaps—he never kissed me."

For a second a curious sense of reverence for her rival, a sense of her own crudeness, even of the hideousness of her frock, humbled her; her youth was swamped in her womanhood. She looked at Mrs. Hyde half yearningly, half admiringly.

"You had everything to help you, to increase your beauty, and you couldn't even love him, or make him love you. It's pride that makes you claim him now, not love, of course! There he is, see—through those trees! And you couldn't even love *that* man?" She broke into a bitter laugh. "Were you—were you mad?" she demanded.

Mrs. Hyde looked at the girl in a cold horror; her passionate out-speaking of her love, the reasonless wild reproaches hurled against herself, her capacity for compelling overwhelming adoration, even her little burst of humility, were a revelation to her. They repelled and repulsed her, but that they would have a quite contrary effect on her husband, she knew for a certainty. This girl had all she wanted—this girl!

But what mattered her personality, she thought wearily, her motive power? What mattered it who she was or how she looked? She had known from the first that such a day as this must come, and she had been waiting for it; she was prepared, and yet—yet—the blow fell as heavily as if she had not been.

"This, then," she thought, unable to keep herself from comparison, "this is the type of woman he can love—this immature, wayward, unfinished creature—unfinished, half-made," she repeated to herself, "with nothing but possibilities about her. That's it, it's possibilities, palpable possibilities, that men love! They like themselves to give the finishing touches; and have I no possibilities? I—O my God! And could he not find them because I look prim? I *cannot* blush—my voice is calm—therefore I am passionless!

Ah, blind Geoffrey—blind and so cruel! Ah well, he may love her, because he must; but he shall not soil his honour, or the honour of my child."

It was this that had driven her here; had forced her from her habitual self-repression, her fine hereditary reticence, her mask of indifference; she would save him in spite of himself; she would brave his anger, his lasting hatred, but she would save him, him and his child. They came of an honourable stock, and it must be kept up, no matter who went under.

She had been brought up by her grandmother, and she had Puritan blood in her; she was a high-minded, proud woman, abhorring smartness as she did the devil; and anything to do with the breaking of marriage vows was sin to her,—good, old-fashioned, seventh-commandment sin, with an unpleasant flavour of Jezebel and dogs about it. At any cost she would save him—her own—her pride, her torture, her terror, but her own.

But she had brought herself to her present course only by a supreme effort, and her heart felt like breaking as she had walked down the hill to the stream; and little as she suspected it, at that moment she came very near to being a heroine, for she had cut self out of all her instincts, and hope out of her heart, for honour's sake. In any case, she knew that this must be the end; that now her last chance of his loving her was gone.

And then to stand and listen to this girl's taunts, in those soft, rushing, maddeningly enchanting gutturals! She sighed; she was very tired, and her eyes followed Margaret's and watched the man who came towards them, whistling for lightness of heart.

And as she looked she forgot everything but him, and that first foolish kiss, and the baby under her heart; and her face was flooded with tenderness, terrible in its strong, calm, desolate pathos. Margaret turned suddenly and saw her; she shuddered, and hid her face in her hands.

"You love him!" she whispered in a low shocked voice. "We both love him! This is awful."

When she lifted her face from her hands she was no longer a happy Pagan—she had grown up.

Although they could see Hyde, a clump of nut-bushes hid them from him. As he came close, and the meeting was upon them, the women looked in each other's faces, and suddenly they were sorry for one another; the bond of their common sex, their common helplessness, touched some hidden chord in them seldom struck—our own sex so rarely appeals to us with any intensity. Involuntarily they bent towards each other, and waited, with strangled breath.

CHAPTER IV.

At the first shock on sight of the two girls Hyde felt inclined to turn tail and fly; but his breeding kept him steady, and took off his hat for him. Then with a hazy notion, born of inherited experience, that under all circumstances women, if they are given their heads, will talk, he waited silently, and during the pause the pains of hell very properly, gat hold of him.

Involuntarily Margaret looked to her who owned him to speak, and to her amazement she had frozen to an impassive, bloodless, prim ghost of a woman, on whom love had never so much as laid a finger. She spoke at last, looking straight out before her, in cold level tones.

"We have always been an honourable race," she said, "and I should be sorry if you were the first to tarnish our record; and now I have also others to consider——" She moved a little nearer to him, and said a few words in a tone only audible to him, and there came a curious violet-pinky tinge into her cheek.

Margaret had an odd sense of being thrust aside; she seemed to herself all at once insignificant, trivial, a mere onlooker in a great tragedy; then in one blinding flash of comprehension the double anguish of the elder woman, this man's rightful possessor, was made known to her, and she herself was thrust out of their path, forlorn. What right had she, compared to the divine right of the other? She shuddered, and a little choking groan, that she tried to stop in her throat, escaped, and broke through her lips.

The sound brought Hyde to his senses. What right had he to hold his tongue and to force his wife, the mother of

his child, to justify her presence, and the poor wronged girl to listen to her?

Thrusting his own part in the business aside for future consideration, his one thought now was for the suffering, sensitive creatures, both in his power. It was no time to whimper over the past. What could he do to help them in the present?

"Beatrice," he said gently, "there is no need to speak of tarnished honour. I hardly know just this minute how far or in what way I have sinned. As to her, she has not sinned in any way."

"Even if she had," said his wife, in the same freezing tones, "it would hardly have been knowingly. *I* am, you see, deluded by no jealousy or other chimeras born of love. She loves you and you love her—that is the one patent fact. She asked me just now why I had let this happen. Possibly she had a right to ask. I have failed in my duty."

"Good God! does she think that?" he thought. "As if it wasn't her accursed sense of duty that had done the mischief! When duty lays hold of a woman's heart she's done for, and so is her husband."

"My dear, you never failed in your *duty*," he said; and the involuntary emphasis was one little stab more for her.

Margaret had grown white, and looked painfully young, with her trembling parted lips.

"Sit down," said Hyde, turning to her, and mechanically stretching out his hand to help her, his wife watching him, with whirling brain.

She moved quickly out of his reach. "I shall stand," she said coldly.

He looked at her; there seemed nothing to say. He waited, wondering, with a far-away, impersonal interest, which of the two would speak next. The conviction of his absolute impotence was numbing his senses. He had forced himself into action for the women's sakes, and had only made matters worse. The only action that could, it seemed to him, in any sort of way help would be to carry Margaret off bodily in his arms; and this, under the cold stare of his

wife, was obviously out of the question. What had Margaret to say for herself, he wondered, with an odd, grotesque interest; but she was silent, breathing hard. She cowered trembling and speechless before the terrors that beset her. It was Beatrice who spoke. She knew her position too well, she was by this time too much accustomed to life, either to cower or to tremble at what it brought her.

"Yes," she said slowly, looking away past them, "you two love each other; and yet we two, who do not love each other, must go home and pretend to do so." Her voice softened and shook slightly as she told her half lie. Margaret looked at her sharply. "Why does she do it, why?" she thought. "Is marriage, then, a terrible thing?" "We must go home," Beatrice repeated with a low, mocking laugh, "and live in the same house, and talk, and amuse our guests, and lie to our servants continually, so that we may be enabled to keep together the honour of our house; and you—you——" she turned her eyes on Margaret;—"who really are the only one amongst us quite guiltless, why, you must go into the outer darkness,—anywhere; but, wherever it is, I suppose it will seem darkness to you."

"What can she know about it?" Hyde thought, wondering at her look.

"But," cried out Margaret, "we're all so young, and the world is so beautiful, and happiness is so near, and none of us—not one of us—has really sinned at all; it is absurd that we should all be made to suffer. God is unjust, God is cruel!"

"Poor little thing! God has had nothing to do with it. Don't you see that it's all been done by a man? I have simply behaved to you both as a cad and a blackguard."

A sudden ghastly sense of the humour of the situation, the hideous, charnel-house humour, occurred to him. He laughed aloud. He shuddered as he heard himself. His wife drew in her breath sharply, and Margaret shut her eyes. That laugh made the hideous nakedness of sin manifest to all three of them. It seemed to Hyde as if the devil were in their midst. He recovered himself quickly. There was an

indecency in the thing; the women, whose souls he held in the palms of his hands, must be spared any further display of it.

For one minute man's power in nature grew loathsome to him; for the first time in all creation a man almost wished he had been made a mere woman.

Mrs. Hyde had grown meanwhile as white as one would have thought any human flesh or blood could be; but her husband's laugh turned her one shade whiter, and she tottered.

When a man's sin overtakes him he generally forgets everything and fights for dear life. Just one little thing arrests him, however,—his protective instincts. One can imagine Othello, if the night on which he slew Desdemona were frosty, tucking the blankets round her; or if it were hot, flicking the flies off her face.

And Hyde saw that the first thing he must now think of was to get his wife to her carriage before things should go any farther. Feeling himself on the horns of a dilemma, he glanced at Margaret, and the general muddle of things brought an unspoken "damn" to his lips. Something in his look of indecision irritated Margaret oddly; she drew herself up with a new air of stateliness.

"Take Mrs. Hyde home, please," she said; "please take her home," she repeated impatiently.

She stood as straight and stiff as a ramrod, and watched them out of sight; then she fell on the earth and hid her hot face among the cool daisies.

Hyde and his wife walked with white faces and hearts like stone towards the carriage, which lay in a bend of the road. The path was so narrow that their very clothes touched, but between them there lay a wide reach of country. When they came near the road Hyde pulled up suddenly and faced her.

"Will you deal altogether with me in this matter? I need not speak of her again. You know her innocence."

"I do know—you appear to choose your victims carefully." For a minute she lost control of herself. "Did you

imagine," she said, in a low sharp tone, "that I came here to triumph over her, or for revenge?—*I*? As if revenge or triumph could touch me! I have done what I thought to be my duty. I have, I suppose, degraded myself in your eyes, as in my own. The whole thing has been inexpressibly revolting to me. But the girl knows now, and has the option to retain her own honour and to save that of our house—or—God in heaven! to think it should rest in *such* young, foolish hands! But it would have been in vain to appeal to you."

She walked past him and leant for a minute against a jutting branch, and looked at him. He looked young and frank, through all his haggard shame and perplexity. Something in him touched Beatrice, and side by side with the bitterness of her wrongs there grew up again in her that obstinate, persistent old love of hers, which had nothing to fatten itself on but her own heart's blood; and then, and for ever after, it silenced every reproach.

She sighed heavily, and went on towards the carriage. She stumbled once or twice, and seeing that she went blindly, he helped her, almost lifting her into the carriage; wondering, meanwhile, at women and their ways. Of course if she had loved him it would have been different; but seeing that she didn't care a hang, any more than he did, it was absolutely beyond him.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Hyde took his wife to her carriage he had not the very smallest intention of going home with her. Circumstances, however, took him in tow, and forced him to his duty. She was absolutely unfit to be left, and the footman's eyes were on him.

When they got home he heard that his lawyer had just arrived from London on a matter of pressing business, that had to be there and then dealt with.

Beatrice went to her room directly, and when her tea was brought to her she drank it thankfully. Then she sat by the window, and went over and over again the scene she had just lived through, till Margaret's face made little burning pictures in her brain, and the triumph of that laugh of hers made mocking songs there—till at last it occurred to her that if she let herself go on in this fashion she would become hysterical and insane, and bed would be her only refuge, which was about the very last thing she desired.

"It had to come," she said, looking tiredly out of the window, "sooner or later, and it has only come sooner. If this girl hadn't awakened him, some other girl would have done it. I have lost my chance—which, after all, is nothing new. Life seems to be one long losing of chances. I had counted, certainly, a good deal on this little coming one, this baby—even that hope is gone now. It's small in a way, but it seems somehow a big thing to lose at a minute's notice. I can't understand—I shall never understand—how I walked deliberately down that hill to stern Fate. He is born to love and be loved—in his own way. Nothing in heaven or on earth will save him when the time comes. I think I was mad when I did it, yet I was driven; I thought

it my one duty. I am a millstone hung round his neck, and one day I shall drown him, and honour, and myself. I should have made it impossible for him to love her, she said, and she spoke the truth. If only I could make myself do it—I could even this minute silence her voice in his heart, and blot out her face from his brain! I could transform him, and myself, and the whole world. Love strong as mine can do anything—anything at all——" she drew a quick sharp breath—"*but* express itself to suit a man. And now I must dress."

She rang, and when her maid came she told her to get out a new gown she had meant to have kept for her first getting up after the baby came, it was so exceptionally lovely and soft.

"And you can do anything you like to make my face look right," she said, with a very severe conscience pain. "I have walked too far—I cannot go down looking like this."

Her face, when she went down, looked quite right, considerably astonishing her husband, who was an innocent man in his way, and knew nothing of the cleverness and the resources of first-family maids.

Then the two fell to playing to each other, and to an appreciative audience, with such marked skill that the footman began to have doubts as to the evidence of his own senses, and winked his disappointment to the butler. And the lawyer, after his sherry, began to feel quite heavy-fatherly towards the young people, and ventured on some family anecdotes of a genial nature.

Mr. and Mrs. Hyde could hardly be said to have grown nearer to one another during the course of that grim repast, but they admired each other enormously by the end of it, and as the train of his wife's tea-gown swept out of his sight Hyde felt quite a glow of conjugal virtue going through him. Possibly it was because her eyes went away with the tea-gown, and his blood could flow again at its ease.

When Hyde had persuaded Mr. Henlen to feel quite

overpoweringly sleepy, and express a longing for bed, though it was only ten o'clock, he changed his coat for a smoking-jacket and got himself into the open air, his blood going at racing speed. By the time he had reached the first gates he had shed conjugal virtue and all other pretences, and was a mere maniacal young man, flotsam and jetsam on the throes of a first passion.

Being a passion under undesirable circumstances, it would be uninstructive and unedifying to attempt any record of his resulting sensations; suffice it to say, they led him first to the plot of daisies where Margaret's face had lain, and then took him for a ten-mile tramp, during which the spring night—a hot unwholesome night, full of budding and unrest—and all manner of uncommendable young man's fancies got into him, giving the domestic virtues their finishing stroke, and laying by for his hereafter many rods in pickle.

As for Margaret, Fate's poor little shuttlecock, she went home, sick with her first dose of womanhood and her opened eyes.

She had looked out for one brilliant instant on the world and all its glory, and then the lid had been shut in her face, and she was left out in the cold, with nothing but memory and a crude handful of knowledge to torture and torment her.

She sat for a time doggedly, while her aunts discussed theology and the shortcomings of the clergy; and then she went to her room, crouched down on her bed, and tried to think. But the time for that had not come; she could only suffer, the bitter unreasonable suffering of the young.

She crouched, cowering and trembling, and wondered what it was that had stripped the courage from her, and made her feel such an atom, such a mere forgotten, drifting fluff in a boundless space. It was life that frightened her, but she could not be expected to know that.

At last it struck her that she must sleep. She undressed and shuddered down into her bedclothes, but no sleep came.

She could not grasp this at all, she must be mad or the world was, or the crack of doom was upon her.

To be unable to sleep is the worst terror of a first sorrow ; it is a presage of old age, of death, of the grave. It is not the peace of death that we dread—for this all life is a striving ; it is the vague doubt that in the grave there is unrest. After our first night of sleeplessness we are never quite young again, never quite fresh and careless. We have begun to throw Hope overboard.

When Margaret came down in the morning her aunts experienced a shock. It took them differently. Miss Julia's mouth trembled as she kissed her niece, and she ate no breakfast. Miss Dering rebuked her niece for being late, and ate an excellent one, and directly it was over she mixed a nauseous draught and stood over Margaret while she swallowed it. And no doubt it was the best possible treatment.

CHAPTER VI.

At the very time that her youth was being kicked into the limbo of dead gods, Margaret was forming the subject of a discussion at the neighbouring Rectory that would have considerably interested her.

The Rector's niece had lately swooped down on him, to set the world to rights generally, and had got Margaret, of whom she had caught stray sights, badly on her mind.

She was a wholesome young woman of an active mind, and with opinions. The one most on the surface at the present time was that Margaret was more or less of a new variety, and that the fact of her not having been discovered long ago proved all concerned to be but of feeble intellect. She had arranged herself so as to be able conveniently to poke her uncle, in case he thought of dropping off, and was at present occupied in flourishing her sentiments.

"Curious that none of you should have eyes in your heads. Why, I didn't see any one to come near her last season, or the bit I've seen of this, and there's a whole fresh batch of them up, ready to spring on their prey in the strength of their lusty youth. She's too young to be handsome, but she's astonishing, and—goodness! that drab dress and the crêpe dabs on the sleeve set against the sublime way she walks down the aisle. Are you in physical terror of Miss Dering, or is it her height, or her teeth, or her bony fist, or has she an evil eye? It can't be the other pink-eyed rag of a woman. Wake up, Uncle Phil, you're nodding again!"

"My dear, I am awake, you give me no chance to be otherwise. Stay your tongue till you meet Miss Dering face

to face. In physical terror?—I should think I was! I feel black and blue all over after an interview with her."

Rica went off again on her other tack.

"To think of letting a girl like that slide, when one considers the miserably unsatisfactory state of the whole tribe of us just now!"

"My dear, my dear!"

"Keep your moralities, uncle dear, till the curate comes. We must consider weaker brethren. Surely I know more of girls than you do. I ought to at least, for I only get at the bottom of them at night, when they're half-undressed. Take my word for it, the unfledged young person, adorned for sacrifice, secure in her good looks and her virtue, is often a distinct puzzle, and a little bit of a humbug. She looks so sweet, yet she's sometimes rather mean, and as cruel as she knows how, and confused as to which are her causes and which her effects. I'm a good deal worried about her; I have indeed known her once or twice to keep me awake. Don't interrupt, dear, I'm just about to hedge. The little things often turn suddenly on to a quite new track, and break out into all sorts of lovableness, and develop all at once souls and hearts and things, unless, indeed, they begin to batten on their own insides, or go to the devil in the shape of a neighbour's husband."

"My dear, you're twenty-one, aren't you?"

"Yes, that, and a few months; but consider my experiences! I'm ninety if I'm a day. Haven't I six brothers and a father? I don't care what you say, the girl has been shamefully neglected!"

The Rector muttered humbly he had said nothing.

"Shamefully neglected!" Rica repeated.

"My dear, you go too fast," said Mr. Weston, with proper professional pride. "Both Mr. Bridges and myself have paid very frequent visits to her aunts, and have done all in our power to induce them to allow of her confirmation."

"Well, of course you had to see to that, it was part of your business. Don't you think, all the same, that if you had succeeded it would have been altogether too funny to

listen to a girl out of that sepulchre of a place offering to renounce 'pomps and vanities,' when by every law of common-sense she must be longing for them all day long? But none of you followed up the aunts, irrespective of theology, and forced them to yield up the girl to her kind. She's a lady, isn't she?"

"Oh dear, yes, of a very good family, a grand old race in fact, Cheshire people, and, I believe, the last of the direct line. The property has gone into the hands of a collateral branch; but her aunts have, I hear, quite drifted from their own sphere, and now consort with cobblers and tailors of their chosen faith."

"What, in the name of mercy, *is* their chosen faith?"

"Plymouth Brethren," said the Rector, wishing devoutly the tea would appear.

"I thought all those people were dead and buried long ago."

"Oh, my dear, they're not!"

"Ah, you wish they were! If I say it for you, it won't matter."

"On the contrary, they're still very much alive. Curious thing, too, that if a fellow in either of the Services feels especially seriously disposed, he very often drifts over to the Brethren,—why, God alone knows! Then, too, he acquires a most lamentable habit of writing interminable letters to his still unregenerate neighbours—all outside The Brethren, as far as I can gather, are placed in that category."

The Rector sighed.

"Ah, I see you have suffered, poor dear!"

"Yes, I have, suffered more severely indeed than I think I deserve. But there are, no doubt, most intelligent and excellent persons among them,—in fact, I know there are; and you mustn't run off with the idea that Miss Dering's eccentricities are the result of her religion; they come of a most eccentric stock. The girl's father, General Dering, was rather a remarkable man,—more or less unbalanced, I imagine, but coming very near to being a genius. I myself prefer, as a father of a family, a man with more balance and

less genius. Moderation, my dear, in all things, is a fine rule of life."

"Yes, and singularly convenient."

"However, I have work to do. Can you give me any idea when you will have ceased talking?"

"I have scarcely begun! Have you never felt the 'strong pain of pent knowledge'? I thought the clergy were continually tormented by it. This is the first afternoon, since I came, that I have had the chance of a talk with you, and now you want to cut it short. However, if you had waited a minute longer, Fate would have served your turn and saved you the appearance of bad manners. There's Mr. Bridges in the distance, a faint speck on the top of the fence. Does he always scale that precipice? As his spiritual superior, you might put a ladder there for his use."

"Bridges," replied the Rector, "is a good fellow, and not responsible for his small personal defects."

"No doubt," said Rica. "But it's somehow hard to get undiluted goodness to appeal to the natural woman, especially when it looks like a white mouse, and hides its hands, and squirms if it gets so much as a naked eye on it. I'm used to big, common-sense men, who keep their insides in their proper places. I can't altogether fathom a little woman-man, that carries its nerves outside it."

"Rica, dear!"

"Dear, dearest! I know. I like him all the same; he's a poor pitiful atom, that it does one's heart good to take care of. Besides, I have a profound conviction that somewhere about him there *is* a spine, and a little heart of gold. The question is, does he strike the generality of people in this double light? Isn't he to some minds altogether ridiculous? If I, for instance, were a rector—however, here he comes, with a trace of moisture on his brow, and draggled beyond description."

"Well, Mr. Bridges," said the Rector kindly, "just in time for tea; and I *will* say for my niece, she knows how to make it."

He spoke in an expansive way, as if he were stretching

after being in a cramped position. He objected to being bothered, he disliked mote-hunting, he had a boundless capacity for always shutting his eyes in the nick of time, and he adored the person of his niece, but the activity of her mind he abhorred.

She had just poured the hot water into the teapot when her eyes fell on the curate's feet; his boots were soaked, and the ends of his trousers dripping.

"Now, uncle," she said, "you can wait a moment for your tea, and the pot can get hot in peace. I must see to Mr. Bridges. Just look at his feet! they're dripping. You slipped when getting over that fence in the down pasture, didn't you?"

"I did, Miss Weston. But pray don't trouble about me —I am used to wet feet."

"No doubt you are, and that accounts for your awful coughs. Come with me." She had been overhauling a deep basket, and had just emerged with a pair of socks that would have held Bridges bodily. "They're huge," she said, apologetically, "but they're dry."

She led the way to a small room near the study, and shut Bridges up with the socks. In a minute she put in her head again.

"Throw out your boots and socks," said she—"the boy will see to them; and could you manage with this pair of boots until yours are dry? Uncle Phil can't be blamed, I suppose, but the size of his feet is a reflection on his family."

When he was sure she really had gone, Bridges flopped bewilderedly on a chair and mopped his face; then he scrambled hurriedly out of his little socks into the big ones. He was frightened to death, but he wished in a vague way that he had a sister.

"Mr. Bridges," said Rica, as soon as she had settled him down to his tea, "shall you be very busy to-morrow? If not, I want you to do something for me."

"Yes—no——" hesitated Bridges.

As a matter of fact, he had a little business of his own to attend to on that very afternoon. Rica was not the only

person who felt an interest in Miss Dering's niece. The little curate felt a very decided interest, and had worked double time to get two free hours to call next day at "The Yews," and his heart was even now throbbing and burning with the desire of merely looking from afar at the girl.

Miss Weston's request damped him considerably. He longed for a minute to be able just to tell one little lie and slip over the difficulty; but he had a fatal incapacity in that direction.

"No, I have nothing at all urgent to do," he said sadly. He wished greatly he could show a little more alacrity, after all her loving-kindness to his extremities.

"I want to call on Miss Dering." He started and pricked up his ears. "I am going to know their niece. I am rather a failure with most girls, but I fancy she and I could pull together. She looks so delightfully, wickedly, inconsequently happy. I should like to know her before she has the chance to fall in love. At the first plunge into that maelström she would of course lose her individuality and become a type, and be spoilt for a time as a subject for investigation—except for one person, of course, probably a fool. There is that in her which will attract fools, and which may also cause her to be attracted by one, until she finds out. I suppose she has hitherto set eyes on no one but you and my uncle?"

Bridges winced. A cold sweat had already broken out on him, and he could hardly hold his tea-cup steadily. Rica went to give her uncle some cake, and the curate blessed the temporary abstraction of her keen eyes. He was writhing in agony lest they should discover him, but he managed to reduce himself to order, and was looking much as usual when she came over to examine into the state of his cup.

"If I survive the first shock of battle, may I ask the niece to dinner on Thursday, uncle? Do you think she has any clothes, Mr. Bridges? Does she wear that drab always? Has she an evening dress? Who, in the name of all that's awful, makes her things?"

"Really, Miss Weston, I fear that in this matter I am powerless to aid you," he gasped, looking at her in undisguised terror.

The Rector burst into a laugh.

"My dear," he said, "don't put yourself out about the gowns. You'll not get her to dinner. You haven't yet encountered Miss Dering. And now, dear, go,—Mr. Bridges and I have some business to talk over."

CHAPTER VII.

"Now, Mr. Bridges," said Rica,—it was the day following, and they were turning in at the "Yew" gates,—"wish success to my maiden sword. I suppose by this time you can face Miss Dering with a stout heart?"

"Oh, no, no!" he blurted miserably. "I confess I can make but little way with her, earnestly as I desire to do so." And truly he did, for more reasons than he would have cared to mention.

"Perhaps she's out."

"I fear not—I fear not; she never is."

Rica swallowed a chuckle, for the grim Hannah was upon them. Miss Dering was at home, and she ushered them into a drawing-room that made Rica think somehow of the stomach-aches of her youth; while Bridges sat waiting, and hoping,—his simple soul alive only to one set of impressions at a time,—quite impervious to the fact that an antimacassar had fallen from its proper position and was draping his back.

The sisters came in directly. The elder, as soon as she had shot her greetings at her guests as if she had been a gun, turned on Bridges, leaving Rica to extract monosyllables from Miss Julia, who had grown quite incapable of carrying on any sustained conversation on worldly matters.

"Mr. Bridges," said Miss Dering, after a few preliminary snaps at him, "you have, I presume, heard of that vile man Dawkins' atheistic lecture?" She folded her hands and stonily fixed him.

"I am naturally aware of the circumstance," he said, with some dignity, "as it has been given in the parish I serve. Both the Rector and myself feel the matter keenly.

We are, however, of opinion that the man is hardly responsible for his actions; he is of an excitable organisation, and has not been quite himself since the unhealthy excitement that Wiggins, the cobbler, introduced into the parish, has been rife."

Miss Dering grunted scornfully.

"I have investigated the matter, root and branch; I may therefore be allowed to have a voice in the matter. Dawkins is as sane as you are, Mr. Bridges; and Wiggins is a man of God. If it be by the Lord's dispensation that he has been born a cobbler, it is not for us worms to cavil." She stiffened her back with an appearance of pride only befitting a worm quite of one mind with its Maker.

"Sister," broke in Miss Julia, in a quavering voice, weakly hoping to cut short the strife, "Miss Weston is anxious to meet our niece."

"Will you be good enough to ring the bell, Mr. Bridges?"

He blessed her almost audibly, and nearly fell over the fireirons in his zeal. Rica suddenly sighted the antimacassar on his back, and as she came forward to secure it, a sudden ray of sunlight fell on her, throwing out into bold relief her hardy, off-hand, wholesome beauty, and the touches of mauve in her exquisite costume. Miss Dering felt that the devil was in the wind, and wished that the bell had not been rung.

"The country must seem dull to you, Miss Weston," she said sourly, "after the dissipations of town." She lifted her eyes a little higher to reflect with sad misgiving on Rica's hat.

"On the contrary, it seems delightful. Perhaps it wouldn't if I hadn't already had my fill of the dissipations —they began so absurdly early this year." Then she took her courage in both hands and plunged in. She knew that unless she did so now she never would. She felt as if she were forming lime already under that Gorgon glare.

"Miss Deering, my uncle expects some people to dinner

on Thursday. We want to know if your niece will give us the pleasure of seeing her amongst us?"

For a full minute Miss Dering felt an inability to find words.

"Thank you. *No!*" she said at last. "While our niece remains beneath our roof, we will, as far as in us lies, guard her from contact with the world *and* the devil."

Rica laughed in her corner.

"But we're really not so bad as all that! I'm quite good myself sometimes. As to my uncle, he's always a real good old man."

"I judge neither man nor woman—I leave that to the Lord; but worldly gatherings we eschew, and shall continue to do so, God helping us, so long as Margaret is given into our hands. Afterwards—we can but pray——"

This was final. Her lips snapped together; she turned her eyes on her sister.

"I am so sorry," said Rica; "I hoped she might come. I wanted to know her." This she said aloud—to herself she put it stronger.

Miss Dering glanced round on the girl. She offended her every instinct, repelled her, terrified her, yet a shameful wish to be able just for a minute to feel—to comprehend—that cool, careless, pleasant assurance that distinguished these worldlings got hold of her, and made her a little giddy. She thrust it behind her in a scurry, and filled herself to the brim with a vague but salutary jumble of carnal sins, scarlet women, brimstone, and Potiphar's wife. Just then Hannah came in, and informed them that Miss Margaret had gone for a long walk, and would not be back until six o'clock.

Miss Dering blessed God.

Rica was on the point of rising to go when her eyes fell on Bridges, whose face of unutterable disappointment revealed his secret. She flopped weakly down again.

"Goodness gracious, that's it, is it? That!" She longed to shake him, to choke him, to sweep him, somehow or another, out of her path. What business on earth had he to

stick in his embarrassing little oar, as if an ogre and a chronic fountain weren't enough, without him! When she recovered herself, there was no chance of getting away. Miss Dering had again fallen on Bridges.

"You are a young man," she was saying, "a very young man,"—she rarely failed to touch him up on this point—"and your experience with regard to this world, as also the world to come, is limited." A sigh escaped Bridges, for he felt that she had got him. "I have your interest at heart, although you hardly appear to realise the fact." She sighed, as did also Bridges, and murmured a faint denial, but she hitched her glasses higher on her nose and continued unbelievingly: "There are certain subjects requiring more wisdom and circumspection than are usually to be found in very young persons. This matter of Dawkins is, in my humble opinion, a case in point."

A sudden gush of courage came to the curate; the lyre-bird in the natural man rose in him; he would show that he too could prance as well as another, in a mild and seemly, strictly clerical way.

"I must remind you, Miss Dering, that I have my Rector always at hand. *His* age can surely be no reproach to him."

"With the age of Mr. Weston I have nothing to do," Miss Dering said grandly. "I am merely aware that he is either blind or—ahem!—lacking in wisdom, to have allowed the proceedings in the Church for which he is accountable to have reached the pass they have done, and to give occasion for a man such as Dawkins to cast a stone."

"What proceedings, Miss Dering? what do you mean?" He felt so ashamed of himself for speaking breathlessly that he made matters worse by blushing.

"Your light-minded tendency, Mr. Bridges, towards the adornment of your person, to mention one."

If Mr. Weston chose to fall short in his duty, she had no notion of sinning on the same lines.

"Miss Dering—pray—you astonish me!"

"Your person," she repeated. "I am informed that last Sunday you appeared in the pulpit in bracelets."

"Your informant misled you. She alluded, doubtless, to——"

"Ribbons fastened round your wrists—embroidered ribbons, young man, with Popish crosses on them, and gold fringes dangling over the Word of God. These you may call what you will. I call them bracelets, and a mockery!"

A rush of words was coming to Bridges. She saw them in her mind's eye, and stood up. She would nip the young man in the bud.

"I have promised to preside at a prayer-meeting," she observed. "I have spoken plain words, which I trust you will receive in the spirit in which they are spoken. I shall now wash my hands of this matter, leaving it in the Lord's."

He knew how hollow was her promise. She was even now off on the war-path to spread strife and dissension among his flock. He heaved a heavy sigh and gave it up.

When they had got themselves out of the house, Rica turned on him with a laugh.

"I'll never speak to you as long as you live, never, if you tell my uncle of our defeat! Oh, yes, we're retreating shamefully, ignominiously, like a couple of whipped hounds!"

An uprising of decent clerical instincts nearly choked Bridges, but he knew that what she said was gospel truth, and so he swallowed his sensations.

"No matter," she continued, "I mean to know that niece."

"Miss Weston, if Miss Dering can prevent it, you never will."

"You don't suppose I shall let that old viper frustrate me!"

"She is a powerful woman, and hard to baffle."

"So it seems," she laughed.

Bridges felt wretched. He knew that between disap-

pointment and dismay he was moist all over, and he had a profound conviction that she too knew it. He would have given much to sit on that smooth pleasant stone by the ditch and mop himself while he meditated, but Rica knew what was good for him ; she carried him off to tea, and insisted on his warming his shaking toes while she fed him.

CHAPTER VIII.

Two days later, Mr. Weston was sitting in his armchair, with a helpless perturbed look on his face. His spectacles were pushed up on his forehead, and the *Times* had fallen down between his knees. Geoffrey Hyde was standing before him leaning against the chimney-piece.

"But," said the Rector wearily, "half-an-hour ago Bridges was here, in an almost incoherent condition, to inform me that you and Miss Dering had gone away together. Now you are here, and of Miss Dering's whereabouts you tell me you know nothing. I confess to feeling rather mysified."

Hyde laughed queerly.

"I don't wonder, the whole affair is a most infernal mess! I hardly think I quite understand it myself, although I have seen it through. You see, I don't mean to excuse myself to you, or to make confession with a sneaking view to getting a veneer of forgiveness. I don't believe in that sort of thing in a case like mine. It's complicated, you see. One carries one's own hell in one's pocket—and in other people's. Therefore I don't come to you as to a parson, but because you, being the head of this community, can best stop gossip, and put things straight generally. *I* can't, as you may guess; naturally, no one would believe me. As to Bridges, poor little chap, although he's an old friend, he's too cut up to be of any use. I had no idea he was in it—awfully sorry for that. That's another score aganist me, I suppose. I'll tell you everything, from beginning to end, and perhaps it will come clearer."

He stood up and walked to the window. He looked old, and haggard, and defeated. Mr. Weston could hardly be-

lieve him to be the same man with whom he had dined a few nights before, and who had sent him home feeling an optimist and twenty-five. Hyde always had that effect upon men ; he somehow put the fulness of life into them.

"I wonder if you would mind Miss Weston's coming in?" he said, turning suddenly from the window. "We see a great deal of her at Lady Duff's, you know. Fred and I being together at Christchurch made us all pretty intimate. Wasn't it curious? the night before Margaret left she did all she knew to go and see her. She didn't tell her aunts, of course, but they got a notion of there being something or other in the wind, and they locked her up in her room, once they got her safe there. She hadn't a friend in the world, you see, and she got a hankering for Miss Weston. I don't wonder ; Miss Weston's a fine creature, with wholesome, manly instincts. I wish to God Margaret had gone to her, the poor little girl!"

"Indeed," said the Rector severely, "so do I. But do you not think it would be pleasanter if you and I had this out together?"

"Certainly, much pleasanter ; but that's not the question. This wretched story is in every one's mouth. I should prefer Miss Weston to hear it direct from mine."

"Well, as you like."

The Rector had his qualms. Just now Rica was rather too much for him. Every one wanted her, it seemed. He objected to too much womanhood poking about the affairs of the Church. And there was Bridges, only an hour before, pouring himself out to her on the same subject in that flaccid way of his, till Mr. Weston had seriously meditated on the possibility of making some provision at the next Church Congress whereby rickets could be excluded permanently from the church.

However, she was generally helpful, if one gave her her head. He rang.

When Rica came in, and saw who was there, she kept her hands very palpably to herself.

"Don't wonder," Hyde said, with a nervous laugh.

"Wouldn't shake hands with myself for something. All the same, I want you to hear the whole story from beginning to end. Will you listen?"

"Yes, I shall listen," she said, unwillingly. She had heard enough of it; her brain was swinging, her heart quivering with it.

"And to think of that fellow, that nice, big, intelligent fellow——"

But when she looked at his face she was a little sorry.

"Sit down," she said, "and tell me all you want to."

He was fortunate in having a simple, pleasant sort of manner that did a lot for him.

"Thank you, awfully."

He took a chair, shifted it a little to the side of her, and plunged in.

"You see, she was quite a new little thing, so amazingly happy. It seemed next to uncanny to find such happiness this end of the century. At first it hardly occurred to me that she came of Christian stock at all; she seemed rather to belong to the woods and the streams, to have come of elfish people. It was dazzling, that happiness! It took hold of one somehow, you were off your feet before you could look round. I'm not making excuses, but I have to explain a bit, it's such a miserable muddle. You know her queer bringing up, the extraordinary share of liberty she was given. Well, we saw a lot of each other for weeks and weeks on end, and—well, I held my tongue—I told her nothing—and just made the best of the good times. Then by some means my wife got to know. She's a good woman, Miss Weston, and as brave as they make them. She came down herself one day to the stream, and she told the other poor little girl all about it. There's not a woman I know who would have done as much, and in the same fine way. It wasn't for my sake, of course, or from any woman's motive—jealousy—that sort of thing, you know—she did it; that's not her line. She's a great woman for ideals, honour, race, prejudice—these things are the breath of her nostrils. It was to save these she did it, Miss Weston."

Feeling that Rica was very much the better man of the two, he addressed himself altogether to her, with an occasional glance towards the Rector.

"Well, the next day, I had toned up my conscience, and my wife's white face kept it up to the mark. It's a shabby thing, you see, to *keep on* hurting your womankind. I went down to that stream feeling equal to anything, able to do everything, both for Margaret and for myself. I hoped so much from her youth and her enormous capacity for happiness. But I found the events of the day before had swamped both. It was horrid to see the change in her, Miss Weston." He stopped for a minute. "It's a thing, you see, adjectives can't touch. Anyway, it would be next door to an insult to tell another woman how the poor little thing looked. Queer, isn't it, how easily a man can do a thing, the very telling of which seems like a sin against all women? And, you see, there were other things. It wasn't only me —she's not a sentimental fool of that order, but she's so young, and it was new to her to have a comrade. She hasn't a friend in the world. I wish to God she had come to you, you know; she wanted to that last night, and they stopped her."

"Did she?"

Rica found that her eyes were hot with tears; and having a horror of this womanly weakness, she felt a little as if the mighty had fallen.

"Yes, but they locked her up, and prayed at her with *their* doors open. The amount of swearing that woman—the elder one—managed to get through in her theological jargon was startling. She had a life of it, poor little thing! Only for her sense of fun she'd have caved in long ago. Of course that went with the other things: it seems a thing always rather easily mislaid in women. I suppose that's what bowls them over sooner than us. Well, instead of keeping her on her feet, and holding her up, I persuaded her to come away with me. She was as weak and ill as anything; she hadn't slept a wink; and her aunt, in addition to the prayers, had given her an enormous dose of qui-

nine or something, that set her ears singing, and put her altogether off balance. She had no friends, you know, nor any home to speak of.—Yes, I know I'm a blackguard, and no end of other things, but you needn't emphasize it with your eyes."

"I was only thinking," said Rica, "I should probably have done precisely the same."

"My dear niece——"

"Of course she wouldn't, Mr. Weston; she's enough of a man already to know that under no possible circumstances could she behave like a blackguard. But it's good of her to say it, all the same. You've no idea what an ass a man feels, reeling off his sins to a woman and a parson. It's an unpleasant situation, take it as you will, and a little encouragement comes home to a fellow. Thank you, Miss Weston; I knew you were a nice, manly girl. I wish Margaret had known you. I wish——" He broke short off.

"You like men best," Rica said. She wanted to give him time.

"Yes, as a rule. I'm rather too much of an ass, yet, for women; they get on one's nerves. Men seem nearer the worms, you know—of a more simple make. Women are all twists; one gets lost in them. One requires age, and the wisdom of serpents, to cope with women. Well, I must get on. It's an awful bore for you having to sit it out, but I can't let you off. I feel like the Ancient Mariner,—I must get it off my mind. When we got to London we went straight to the 'Métropole.' It's a howling wilderness of a place; one's only a number there and feels safe from observation. I made her lie down and rest. I had to go out and arrange about money and things; you see, I came off in such a hurry. I was away two or three hours—banker out, and other delays. When I got back again, she wasn't a little broken, tired girl in my hands any longer. She was a woman—a good, strong, sane woman. She had been having it out with herself in the interval. She looked grey, and there were nearly black half-moons under her eyes. Of course I wanted to kiss her—that's a man's first

idea, you know ; but she put me back and began to talk of it all."

He stopped for a minute, and changed his position, leaning nearer to Rica. He had altogether forgotten the Rector by this time.

"It was extraordinary how deep down she had got. She gave names to things, and simply walked all round me. I needn't tell you all she said ; she didn't, of course, in any sort of way convince me ; I was wild to have my own way. But she didn't give me so much as one chance. If you'll believe me, she had been out already, had wired in my name to my wife, saying that I had been called suddenly away, and should be home by the late train. She had also written to her, and had sent the letter. She didn't leave me a loophole : and she looked so ridiculously young. Have you ever noticed the funny, little-baby look about her chin, Miss Weston ?

"There's not a mean spot in my wife, as you know. She gave me that letter this morning without turning a hair. She doesn't care a rap for me, of course, but—it was hideous for her. Such a letter, too; the gentle, reassuring, matter-of-fact way Margaret had put it. It was amazing in a girl of her years and experience; her growth in these few hours was ghastly. Of course she put it all right for me; one would have sworn she was the tempter and I the poor little victim."

"What was she going to do with herself ?"

"She had arranged her own plans in the most business-like way. She had decided to go and live with her nurse, a soldier's widow, of whom she is very fond, who had brought her from India; a good creature, well enough off, and a lot above her class. She wouldn't give me the address, not if I went on my knees for it; and her aunts, it seems, haven't a notion where the woman lives. She promised on her honour to let *you* know—she was always hankering after you—if she was ever in trouble."

"Those miserable aunts! To think they had so little hold on her after all these years."

"Yes; she declared it was no self-sacrifice to cut herself off from them, but a relief."

"But a girl such as she is can't be cut off, as you call it. People in her position don't get lost nowadays."

"No; it's my clumsy way of putting it,—I feel a good deal of an ass to-day. She's only going away for a time to forget, she says; as a matter of fact, she thinks it's the only thing to bring me to my senses. A good woman is a wonderful thing, Miss Weston; it's an awful pity so many of them keep their goodness so close. If they'd let it out, the world would be a better place to live in.

"She will, it seems, have quite a large fortune when she comes of age, and she is by no means foolish as to the advantages that will result from it. Meanwhile, she says she can't have a worse time for dulness and want of society than she had at her aunts'. Besides, even if I hadn't to be thought of, she would not dare to return to them; she would rather face anything than their prayers"

"Well?"

"Then she told me what I was to do. Of course I made the usual protests, swore the usual things; but she merely looked at me out of her big eyes, and made me feel rather more of a blackguard than I did before. She laughed once or twice—think of her having grown old enough in that time to be able to laugh in the midst of her first earthquake! She arranged it all. I was to go home, grin and bear it, do the very best I could for my wife, and live it down."

"And are you going to——" asked Rica, gently,—"to do the best, I mean?"

"There's nothing else left to do. Besides, you know, I promised her," he said simply.

"But, but," put in the Rector at last, "what about present funds?"

"Oh, that's all right. She was very sensible. She has £2,000 in the bank altogether in her own power. She asked me for a draft on my bank for that amount, and gave me an order on hers. That, you see, further prevented any chance of my tracing her. She thought of everything. The

end of it was, that when she had got me to promise not to try to follow her, and to do all she asked, she sent me out on some pretext. When I came back she was gone, just leaving a letter. She hasn't much confidence in me, poor little thing!"

"Oughtn't her aunts to know just how it is?" said Rica.

"Oh, they know. That seemed the first thing to be done. I was there this morning."

"You mean to say you have been there?"

"Yes, for over an hour, I think."

Rica sat up and looked at him; and the Rector, who had put the professional twist on his mouth very early in the narrative, permitted it to relax secularly.

"Yes, it was a bore. I felt very bad all the time. The old one enjoyed herself enormously. It was, in fact, some sort of a compensation for the occasion. Well, I must get home. Will you come and see my wife soon, Miss Weston?"

"If I were you, Hyde," said the Rector, "I would go in for something, some work or another; it's a pity to let as good a degree as yours slide altogether."

"So it is, sir; doing nothing gets to be an awful fag after a course of it. Yes, I'll sit on the County Council, or turn poor-rate collector, or go in for a scheme. When a man has made a grand success in muddling his own affairs, he feels his proper sphere must be the management of the universe. Thank you both, most awfully. I feel I did the right thing in coming to you, Miss Weston. I wish she had come!" he said, so that only Rica could hear him. "Oh, going to shake hands with me, are you? That's good of you, that's very good of you!"

"You dear old darling!" said Rica, as soon as he was off the premises. "You kept the parson under in a most astonishing way!"

"My dear," said the Rector, with a faint smile, "directly he came in he took the bull by the horns, so to speak, and gave me distinctly to understand that he would have nothing in the shape of a parson brought to bear on him. Be-

sides, as a matter of fact, he delivered himself to you, not to me."

"You have one consolation, he's having as bad a time of it as any self-respecting rector could desire—he's a wreck, the ghost of a man."

"I wonder what of the poor wife?" Mr. Weston said, making his mouth, by one turn, an object-lesson in propriety.

"Yes, we have flung a thought to her; and yet I have never seen, or spoken to, or thought of her, without feeling in my bones that there was only a thin crust between her and destruction. Sphinxes don't appeal to men of that order. Those two were insane to marry."

"Possibly. I wish to God, however, that having done so they had contrived to live together decently."

"Or had kept the indecency away from one's own parish? I know it's horrid for you, you dear! I felt it all the time."

The Rector wished to goodness that she had not got into that way of hitting the right nail on the head. It was an unlovely thing in woman. Certainly, taking it all round the Romish Church was wise in its generation.

"By the way," she said, "when one comes to think of it, there's been a quiet engaging air of youth about the whole transaction. Imagine Geoffrey Hyde's feelings when he returned to find her flown, and the waiter's, ay, and the booking-clerk's reflections, and Margaret in that hideous dress, and with the middle seam of her jacket all cut crooked. She did her duty nobly, but she needn't have made him so abjectly ridiculous. I wonder if he swore much, and if the waiter and the chambermaid heard him through the keyhole. It's embarrassing to be as young as that, but it's delicious. I feel such a weight of age on me this minute, it's like a thunderstorm on my head. I wish I could go to a ball and dance it off!"

The Rector looked at her anxiously, and a vague memory of his dead wife and smelling salts hovered before him; then another of a rather red nose and treble squeals, nicely

modulated. No! smelling salts evidently didn't meet the case; besides, they gave red noses. He was getting incoherent himself, from want of rest.

"To think that Miss Dering's niece should be the centre of a village scandal, uncle! May I go and bring whatever fragments of Mr. Bridges still remain back to dinner?"

"By all means; a drive will do you good."

He felt it would also do him good; he was beginning to feel battered, disreputable, immoral, under this tempest of emotions. If he had been an ordinary, vulgar, faithless shepherd, with the Bishop considering his case with prayer, he could not have felt worse.

CHAPTER IX.

REPENTANCE, even when it happens to be a chosen dispensation, and conducted under the most dramatic and favourable circumstances,—to the sound of martial music, so to speak,—is an unpleasant exercise. When it is compulsory, and has a ridiculous aspect, it grinds small. Only God and those who have endured it have any notion of how ghastly it may then become.

When Hyde reached home after delivering himself to Rica, he washed, dressed, and fell to meditation. But what he produced was poor stuff. He was feverish, restless, unstrung. He had not slept a wink for two nights, and had been travelling the best part of the third. Thought, desire, regret, duty, above all the ridiculousness of the situation, and the infinitesimal smallness of the show he himself had made in it,—all put together, made an ugly whole. An unsuccessful sinner is such a miserable animal ! inevitable repentance is so mawkish ! there didn't seem to be a wholesome drop in the whole disagreeable cup.

Even common decent living had become diseased. To live decently with one woman, with your whole soul, and spirit, and body strained with longing for another, was a horrid business ; to do it, too, because the woman you longed for had trapped you into doing it—had sacrificed herself to ensure the carrying out of the farce. It was a hellish joke, a comedy of virtue for the benefit of devils. It was all too incongruous, too crudely ludicrous, to draw to itself human interest.

He had kept all this turmoil well under during his talk with Rica ; it was meant for a man to digest, not for a

woman to reflect on. But it came harder on him for the repression.

It occurred to him, after a week or so wasted in enervating reflections of all descriptions, that there was one clean straw that might be caught on to ; it was that held out by the supine and rather flabby Rector in his suggestion that he should engage in some work. He sat up briskly.

"Yes, work, that's the thing, the one sensible word he spoke—to live it down and to work."

The thought acted like a talisman. The starch drifted back gradually into his body ; as he considered further he felt still better ; the divine afflatus of self-esteem returned by degrees into his soul ; he felt taut, trim, ready for anything ; he could walk straight and look forward and throw ridicule—even that of the clubs—to the dogs.

Having been hitherto idle, there was a refreshing newness in the idea that made it singularly stimulating. Yes, work was the one thing. It would meet every side of the case, fulfil every requirement.

One day, on his return from an aimless ride—having to remain in the country the best part of the season seemed just now a distinct bore—he sat down to his desk and began a letter to a friend.

The friend was a man of energy, a ferocious worker, and the editor of a leading journal, who had badgered him more than once to strike out and shed his sloth. He had only got as far as "Dear old—" when a footman entered, and announced sepulchrally that Mrs. Hyde was very ill, and the doctor had been sent for.

This stripped the gilt off the gingerbread in a twinkling ; he must be up and doing, but the quality of the work was what he had hardly bargained for.

She was very ill ; the first time he saw her, he wondered what power it could be that kept her alive. It was certainly neither breath nor blood. The sight of her was a shock ; it brought his sins home to him from a new point of view, and he was convinced that he could see the full knowledge of the whole batch of them in the doctor's eyes.

But he held on doggedly, and did what he could, which was exceedingly little, waiting and watching, being of absolutely no account in the house, and feeling all the time more or less of a malefactor, and ever so much of an ass. The baby too,—who, when it came, was a poor premature weakling, and heir to two big estates—provided him with a variety of eminently unpleasant sensations.

All these things, mixed up with thoughts of Margaret, —her loving and losing,—made for him a very pretty medley of things human.

As soon as life struggled back into Beatrice, and went halting on its way, Geoffrey was frequently invited into the room, to watch her lying half conscious, with the small sick baby at her side, and wish to God he could get out again. It choked him to be there, and as soon as she began to notice his presence he saw very clearly that it also choked her. It was a refinement of cruelty, carried on apparently for the benefit of the nurse.

One night the nurse fell ill, and then arose chaos in the establishment. There was scarlet fever in the village, which put a local nurse out of the question, so that they had to wait until one arrived from town. Even then there was some mistake ; it was two days and a night before she came. In the interval, Hyde took the bit between his teeth, and settled into the collar.

He watched her, keeping himself well out of sight. He noticed every change in her, every look ; he insisted—vicariously—on every morsel of nourishment being swallowed ; and once on his own intuition he insisted on sending for the doctor, who came, and only just in time.

Two or three times she found him out, and made a faint weary protest. This struck him with a vague pain, as of an inward hurt. Surely it was her right, she had forfeited nothing ; and no less surely was it his duty.

Duty and penance had become convertible terms, and the better duty was done the more like penance it became,—a fruitless penance, that brought one no nearer any known heaven.

When he was tired, watching near her door one night—fearing the nurse snoozed when it was her duty to keep herself specially alert—and his brain generally being in a muddle, it occurred to him all at once how delightful it would be to be a Catholic, and faithful, able to watch one's sins rolling off one like flakes to the chink of coin of the realm ; then duty might have a rest, and so might he. It was evident that he, as well as his cousin, had got some drops of Puritan blood playing about somewhere in his economy.

His two days' and a night's nursing had turned the scale, the doctor said, and saved her life.

When the new nurse came, Hyde stretched himself violently, and rode over to see Rica. She stimulated him, threw a broader light on things, and she had a renovating laugh. Besides, he knew as well as if she had told him that the one spot of romance in her prosaic heart was Margaret Dering ;—that she had enshrined her in its wholesome depths, and meant to keep her there and love her.

CHAPTER X.

DANBY ROW was one of those unhappy places that had once seen better days. In the middle of the last century it had been inhabited by stout burghers and well-to-do professional men; but as the neighbourhood thickened those genteel persons retired, and the backs of their houses had been pulled down to make way for other buildings, and only the fronts remained; so that, though each house contained but few rooms, they were, for the vicinity large and convenient.

In the front parlour of one of these houses an old woman was entertaining a district visitor—suffering her, would possibly be the more correct expression.

The room was clean, and cosy, and pink-chintzy—that peculiar cherry pink of the chintz of a past generation. The old woman looked alert, and the tints of her face were unusually clear and pure for her time of life. Scouring, and cleaning, and polishing formed part of her creed, and she had somehow managed to keep her heart as clean as her fireirons.

She had just sniffed and planted her hands firmly on her knees. She was a thoroughly respectable woman, and had had a good "bringing-up," but "some things is too much for any sinful being," and Miss Dow, the new district visitor, in her zeal for the decencies, was one of those things.

"Really, Mrs. Bent, I meant no offence. It is our duty to seek and to save the—ahem!—fallen."

"Indeed, ma'am, I don't deny you. I have nothing to say against it; but it might be as well to seek 'em where they may be found. There be none o' that quality here, and here I have lived these ten years, come Easter."

"Will you be good enough to request this young person to remain in on Thursday, when I hope to be round again?"

She was about to put a little book on the table, but she paused in the act, for Mrs. Bent had risen, and assumed a belligerent and highly unbecoming attitude of mind and body. She was as stiff as a poker, and her old eyes, with the pathetic white line in them, were dancing with rage.

"Am I to ask Miss Margaret, my young lady, to remain in on Thursday, ma'am, if so be it is quite convenient to her? Is that what you wish me to do, ma'am?"

"I was not aware you had any young lady staying with you, Mrs. Bent." She made a vain but futile attempt to keep down her voice. "I am only saying that every neighbour in the place is talking of this matter. It is not to be supposed that such a person would take refuge here without her reasons. Her dress is unbecoming to the last degree."

"Indeed, ma'am, I have lived all my life in good families, and in my poor opinion my young lady has uncommon good taste."

"And—she was seen with a baby in her arms the other day; that also, no doubt, is in uncommonly good taste!"

She spoke fast and spluttered, as she usually did when her sense of virtue was outraged more than usual.

"Very like indeed, ma'am. Miss Margaret have a rare fancy for babbies."

"You take it strangely, Mrs. Bent. Every neighbour in the place is talking of her."

"The neighbours would do well to hold their tongues on some matters, ma'am, more especially rings and babbies; and it behoves not you, ma'am, who comes to help and teach us, to hearken to such ridiculous slanders."

A horrid suspicion that possibly she had made a mistake, and that the Vicar might hear of it, inspired Miss Dow with a sudden inclination to get away. She said a frigid "Good afternoon," and departed, slamming the door behind her.

"The poor soured body!" thought Mrs. Bent. "Neither rings nor babbies have ever come in her way, I'll be bound. But I wish I had opened the door for her—it seemed disrespectful like."

Miss Dow was new to her work, and a fool. She was, besides, a prim, well-dried person, with a parochial nose.

When Margaret had arrived at Danby Row, had told her story, and had been taken straight to the old woman's heart, she had been buoyed up by the consciousness of her victory, of her sacrifice, of her escape from a great danger. She would hide herself and rest, and try to grasp hold of life again. She thought she would here, in this wilderness of houses, have a free field to do it in. She imagined that among these poor people, and in the general laxness of law, she would be forgotten, passed over; that no one would want to find out anything about her.

But she was altogether mistaken. Poor and rich alike have points in common. They are both curious, and both sparing of their charity; and if a mystery, who won't allow herself to be got at, takes up her burthen of life in the midst of a community of either class, she will find but a cool reception.

If, into the bargain, she has astonishing eyes, and the pride of race in every movement, so much the worse for her. Moreover, the poor are local in their sympathies; moral laws may be as slender as you please among the neighbours, or their immediate relations, but they do not relish imported persons from the higher ranks, with unfathomable doubts attached to them. Margaret found she was poaching on other people's preserves. There was quite enough home-grown doubtfulness in this neighbourhood without contributions from alien quarters.

Besides, her manners did not take. She had but one weapon in her small armoury to oppose to their suspicions and their flood of blood-curdling questions. This was silence. Before she had been there a fortnight, she had got the name of "an 'orty 'ussy." Her attitude, indeed, galled them frightfully, and, being so absolutely opposed to their

own methods, it struck them as next to indecent. They heartily detested her, but unluckily their distaste didn't keep them off her. They infested the house, and made Mrs. Bent's soul sick within her, for, being a peaceful body, she didn't like to show them the door. Even had she done so, they might possibly not have taken it, being much interested in working out their problem.

Broadly speaking, you may lose yourself to all eternity in London, but it's a moral impossibility to do it in a Row. The Rowites will get to the bottom of you, or of their rendering of it, or they'll know the reason why.

After a few face-to-face experiences with them, Margaret always contrived to fly up to her room on the first landing, where she would listen to them at her leisure. For the representatives of the Row's public opinion had all-piercing tongues, and delivered their sentiments in plain terms.

This was bad enough, but Miss Dow was the worst. She was presumably good, and had some education ; and it requires a certain smattering of education to be properly nasty. Indeed, it had been Miss Dow, in her zeal, who had first cast the doubt, and tickled the ears of the Rowites.

All these things, then, being against her, Margaret's faint spurt of virtuous exaltation slipped off her, and left her soul to its leanness—her heart to its forlornness.

"God help the child !" said Mrs. Bent to herself, after a long musing, in which two or three stitches had been dropped ; "God help her, for He alone can ! What's come to that milkman, I'd like to know ! Here's five o'clock, and not a drop for tea."

She went to the door and looked anxiously up and down the street. It was a narrow street, mean and dull, one end opening into a broader, more ambitious road, where many of the houses had venetians to all the front windows. The other end opened into a labyrinth of tiny alleys, and lanes, and dark passages.

To the left, the neighbourhood was bad from an ethical point of view, but it might have been worse. Of the neighbourhood to the right the less said the better. It was an

unholy vicinity, and was eschewed by those who had a reputation to keep up, or who "let on" they had.

Danby Row was a short cut West-Endwards, and was thronged as night fell by the crowd that seek their bread or their pleasure in the dark hours. Then God-fearing folk mostly drew their blinds and shut their doors and their ears, if they had any respect for them, waiting in patience till the hordes had swept past.

The Row had the usual "trimmings,"—the pub. at the corner, and the due proportion of mongrel curs and broken crockery, babies and oyster shells.

Presently Mrs. Bent perceived Margaret and the milkman coming down the street at the same moment, and she went in to make the tea.

Margaret's dress was a marked success. She had naturally excellent taste, and she had been fortunate in the shop she had gone to. There was a marked simplicity about the girl, and the frock emphasised it.

When she saw herself in it for the first time she had gasped, and, for a minute, she was perfectly happy. She was so new to herself, such a delicious surprise. She had also gasped when she saw the bill, and concluded that in London the cost of a dress is in exact proportion to its simplicity,—in which, no doubt, she was about right.

Then there gradually grew up in her the need for a hat and boots and gloves to match the frock, so that as she walked into Mrs. Bent's front room she was an absolutely, consciously, well-dressed young woman.

It was fortunate for her that she had thus early in the day discovered a good dressmaker. If she had set forth to tread this vale of tears in her drab gown she would infallibly have dropped by the way into a decline.

Instead of which, she had, so far, kept her health and preserved her self-respect.

CHAPTER XI.

"Miss Dow was here," said Margaret, as she drank her tea; "I saw her, and dodged her down a lane."

"Yes, dear, she was here."

"Did she say anything about my being out?"

"She said a good deal, poor crittur,—more words than sense."

"She's a detestable person, and her voice is worse than Aunt Katherine's. She's built a perfect charnel-house of sins up round me; all she comes for is to sniff out a fresh stone to add to her structure."

"Take no heed of her, dear. When you've lived as long as me you'll know something of what women as disappointments have turned bitter can be."

"But what is she disappointed in?" said Margaret, wondering vaguely if it had anything to do with her nose.

"Old maids, my dear, is standing failures, and they knows it."

"But perhaps they prefer being old maids?"

"We'll hope they do, Miss Margaret, some on 'em. I doubt if Miss Dow's state is from preference. It's agen natur', dear, mostly, as much as agen inclination. It's a dispensation of the Lord's, dear, and no doubt meant for good, but I never see an old maid that I don't ask the Lord to have mercy and deal gently with her little ways, as it's by His own hand she's been afflicted."

Margaret thought her theology was a little mixed, but she said nothing.

"The Lord's hand lies heavy on women," Mrs. Bent went on. She often had a little musing fit after tea. "Married or single. If we're married, there's a husband to put

up with; if we're not, there's the want of one. It's contrariness and leanness of soul either ways." She looked up presently and noticed Margaret's clouded face. "Don't think of the words of that person, Miss Margaret; God knows you deserve none of them!"

"I wasn't thinking of her, Mrs. Bent. I suppose God does know," she said, after a minute or two; "but, after all, what He knows isn't altogether to my credit. All the people here believe that I'm an active sinner of some sort or another. Passive sin never enters into their calculations. It's not tangible enough; besides, it seems the normal condition of so many of them; you see it simmering in their eyes. Even for Miss Dow, who is a peg above them, I would lose half my interest if she knew I had really stopped short at breaking a moral law. But God knows better; He knows that at this present moment I long for sin—which means, I suppose, Geoffrey Hyde; that I hate and detest being good—which means keeping out of his way. She was there to-day, and there was a little white baby in the carriage beside her, such a tiny white mite; and her husband came up two or three times and spoke to her, looking all the time as if he were sorry. I think she was the prettiest woman in the crowd, and her turn-out was the best. I wonder—I wonder very much if he hates being good as much as I do, or if the baby's a consolation. Do men ever find consolations in such very small things? I myself think it must be rather improving to the mind to have a baby. I can't imagine any one's hankering for forbidden things with a small white creature like that staring one out of countenance. I have a sort of notion that that baby will blot out me. I should be glad and rejoice, shouldn't I? Yet I don't like it the least bit. It's abominably horrid to be forgotten, although I know I made rather a fine speech to him on that very subject. How one's moods change!"

"Miss Margaret, dear, don't!"

"Let me babble; it means nothing, and it's been a horrid day somehow. I was just thinking that women are altogether different from God, here at least among the guileless

poor. They only see things in spots, just a mere fraction of one side of a question, and all they can't see they consider must be evil. And as they only see one atom of me, they think the rest as evil as they have imagination for. But what on earth does it all matter?"

Mrs. Bent was a tender soul, and she began to cry a little —besides she was shocked. Margaret, as a rule, was so very silent on these matters, she could not understand her feverish, restless rush of words.

Margaret heard her small, patient sobs, and thought what a pleasant thing it would be to be able to join her;—her own eyes felt so hot and dry. She supposed that with the weight of years on one, and with life lived, and skies grey, one could cry at will. It seemed rather nice.

Then she wished vaguely she had never found that scrap of *Morning Post* from which she had learnt that Mr. and Mrs. Hyde, baby, and suite, had come up to town, and which had driven her to go out to watch for them in the park day after day—every day, however, from a different coigne of vantage, for she had found out, from men's eyes, new facts about herself that had made her wary.

Mrs. Bent cried on for a little, and wished that the world wasn't so exceedingly puzzling a place, or the ways of God so mysterious. Then it suddenly struck her that she herself was no better than an idle slattern. She got up briskly, washed her cups and saucers, "tidied up" her room, and took a turn round the premises. When she returned it was dusk. Margaret was still there, and her hat was still on. Mrs. Bent looked at her for a minute, and perceived that this betokened an immoral attitude of mind.

"Miss Margaret, my dear," said she, "will you go and get your brush? and I'll do your hair."

Margaret went mechanically. Brushing as a means of grace was a strong belief of Mrs. Bent's.

She brushed out the shaded shining masses of hair for a few minutes; then she began, in a nice monotonous old voice,—

"I mind me of a little village in Surrey, dearie, nigh on

to the common, where be wild birds, and heather, pink and white and purple, and little white wax flowers with green lines in 'em, that glistened like frost. I went down there years since, afore my John spoke up. He was ready to speak, and should ha' done so, but—there was a hussy—girls do make sich fools o' theirselves for soldiers' sakes! But I was high in myself, and I left him and the hussy to settle it between 'em, and went down to an old aunt. There wasn't a sound sharper nor a church bell, and the milking cry o' the cows; and of evenings, when the bees had gone home, one could hear the grass talkin' like silver bells. It seemed summow to quieten one down. I needed quietin' in them old days. I was wild and fierce. I used to sit out among the little purple bushes and drink in the air, and smell the blossoms, thinking betimes of my John, and rating the hussy as she deserved. My hands were idle, but I think I learnt more'n if they had worked."

She dropped the brush suddenly, and clapped her hands, and a funny young light shone out in her eyes, blurring the white lines in them, as she sat again among the heather and thought of John; but something—the hussy, possibly—called her suddenly back, and the light in her eyes went out. She sighed, and continued her brushing.

"Will you come down to the little village with me, Miss Margaret dear? I went by the coach then, and it took half the day. But the train goes now, and an hour brings you."

Margaret looked up. It seemed just what she wanted—the quiet, the hush, the droning bees; the fever in her blood might cool there, the maddening whirl in her head stop. It sounded delicious. She dropped her head and let Mrs. Bent go on with her brushing, then she suddenly lifted it.

"It would be altogether perfect," she said, "except for—things—which I think would make the quiet and the hush rather horrid. It's for me you want it, you old dear, not yourself, isn't it? You're not disappointed?"

"I! No. dear. I have no mind for gadding, and the place would seem altered, and it's that distractin' to learn

where things in a new place be. I thought belike it might do you good."

"But you do me more good than any heather would. You have made my headache vanish now with your brushing. How odd your eyes look! Look at me again—they seem as if they had seen everlasting things and had found peace. Peace must be a pleasant sort of thing to find, I fancy."

"You'll find joy as well as peace, my lamb. The old have left the joy before they have found the peace, and joy is the best, dear. One feels sad and lonesome the day one finds the joy is gone. But one has the looking forward. Of that the young knows naught. The joy and the peace both will come to you, dear, in His good time."

"His good time!" Margaret gave a little laugh. His good time somehow sounded funny in this dull street.

"Listen to that church clock—doesn't it sound horrid, as if some one had died miserably? We must go to bed, you're tired to death."

She prepared unwillingly to go to her room, which was the one opposite the parlour. She was beset by nameless fears. From the time that she had first seen the two in the park she had never slept more than an hour together. She used to lie in her white sheets on the big feather bed—the pride of Mrs. Bent's soul—and toss in the dreadful silence, longing for the day. She grew old in the night, and hope fled from her.

The old woman watched her patiently, and her weary eyes grew dim.

"Dear," she said, "I would to God you could pray!"

Margaret laughed and shivered.

"Perhaps I shall when little things like blobs and sparks stop bobbing up and down before my eyes. I think they're devils. They were awful last night. They drove prayers or anything in the shape of sleep to the other end of the world."

Mrs. Bent reflected sadly on her, then she kissed her, and as she prepared herself for bed—she had a complica-

tion of observances to work through before she got there—for the first time in her life she got God and the devil inextricably mixed up in her brain.

The injustice of allowing the young to lie awake in the night watches seemed to her to show altogether too great an ignorance of the requirements of young people to be the work of an All-knowing Jehovah.

CHAPTER XII.

THE little bobbing devils, the mention of which had so severely shocked Mrs. Bent, were really kindly creatures, the brain's little errand boys, sent out to say it wanted a doctor.

When Margaret went next day to keep her foolish vigil in the park, she felt a sudden panic in the midst of a throng of carriages, near the Marble Arch, and she barely escaped being run over. She had again lost courage, she thought, as she sat shivering in the sun, and waiting till "they" should come.

She and the baby came first; then he rode up, and told her something with a laugh, and she gave a little, pleased, unaccustomed smile, and her eyes melted as she turned them on the baby in the nurse's arms. Margaret wondered vaguely if he had noticed their sudden loveliness; then a frantic notion seized her that it was her bounden duty to go and then and there draw his attention to the fact. Then she stood up half-dazed. It seemed to her to be already dark, and after a long time—minutes—years—centuries—she got to an omnibus and drove up and down, round and round, for a few centuries more, and then Bedlam broke loose, and the noise of the whole world clattered about her ears. She had to lift herself up to fly, but there was no place to fly to —it was all noise and whirl, stress, and the empty howling of fiends. At that point a whirlwind caught her, and she knew nothing more.

She was huddled up against a wall, unconscious, in a little lane off Tottenham Court Road, where the old bookstall stood, and a girl was apostrophising her inanimate form with much interest and more curiosity.

"She ain't drunk, neither!" she was remarking. "She don't look it, and there ain't no smell o' liquor. Blest if I know what to do with 'er! The p'lice would be the best, no doubt, but she don't look the sort summow for them t' andle. She ain't one of us, for certain.—My, but she's pretty!—Wake up, will yer?" She shook her, but without the slightest effect. "Mercy! be she a-goin' to lie here all night, and me with no end to do before work begins?" she muttered enigmatically.

She was a big, full-breasted, handsome girl, with large, frank, not to say bold, eyes; a fresh, thoughtless mouth, and bright pink cheeks. She wore an astonishing fringe, and was plentifully befrilled and bedizened. The powder-puff had been handled freely, but seemingly by a 'prentice hand. The powder had got into her black brows and on to the ends of her fringe; but for all that, and for all the signs and tokens of her calling, she was pleasant to look upon. The ugliness of vice had, as yet, had no time to deface her. She was young, and she enjoyed her life. The lawlessness and the strangeness of it pleased her simple soul. She was a young animal, with her small speck of a soul in its babyhood.

She bent her ruddy warm face down to the cold one.

"She's a real lady, too, a tip-topper, although her clo'es ain't up to much." She caught up a handful of the dress and sampled it with some natural scorn. "Serge! And not a morsel o' silk on it, not as much as a dab o' braid. Suthin' queer 'ere! I wonder wot might it be. The fit is good, and the figger—lawks! Wake up, my dear!"

She set to chafing her hands with vigour.

"I wonder 'ave 'er young man been and cleared! Like enuff! Bill served me that way with slight enuff cause." She heaved an ample sigh and regarded the situation with interest, and with some sentiment in the turn of her head. "She's 'ansomer nor me, darned if she's not!"

Her resulting sigh was one of mortification, and she thought she would call the police. On second thought she

decided not to do so, for in that case she would never get to the bottom of it at all.

"Open yer eyes, miss,—lor! them lashes, longer nor mine! Ain't I a fool, a-coddlin' of a young woman as 'll like enuff shake the touch o' me off 'er as soon as she starts to come to? She's a-stirrin'—there, dear! let me 'elp yer. 'Pon my word, I thought as you'd never chirp up. May I make bold to inquire wot yer name may be, and where y' may live?"

She was torn with curiosity, and thought she would steal a march, and gain her information before any doubt as to her calling should dawn on the young woman. Perhaps then it might be a sermon instead. There was terror in the thought. She had suffered in her time.

"Where may you live, miss?"

Margaret looked at her with an enquiring, wondering gaze. It discomposed her, and made her shift her position a little.

"One don't care to be pried into by womenfolk!" the girl reflected. But she pressed her question nevertheless.

"Your name, miss? and where may you live?"

"Oh, my name—Margaret Dering; I live at Mrs. Bent's —Danby Row."

Her voice was hardly audible, but at the name of the Row her listener ejaculated a smothered "I never!" She knew the place, and it seemed to her, more than ever, that there must be something under it all. This she doggedly resolved to find out. When one has a whole day on one's hands as she would have to-morrow—one cannot sleep for ever—a mystery to scent out is a god-send.

The enquiring eyes recalled her.

"Oh—I—I'm a milliner—goin' West after a late order. My, but yer weak!" The white upturned face touched her queerly. "I ain't in no partickler 'urry, and I 'ave a shillin' or two about me. I'll see yer 'ome."

With quick decision, she set to shout lustily to a passing cab, and from some vague sense of decency she refrained

from any play of repartee with the cabman, who happened to be an old friend of hers. Indeed, she felt quite haughty and resentful at his easy wink as she half-pushed, half-lifted Margaret into the cab.

"Thanks be to goodness, she couldn't see that!" she thought; then she wrapped her rabbit-lined cloak round Margaret with clumsy good nature.

The drive in the fresh evening air revived Margaret, and she turned gratefully to her companion.

"You're most awfully good! But don't give me all your cloak. Come, take half for yourself."

"Thanks, no, miss, I'm orful 'ot."

"Lor! if she knew," she thought with a nervous giggle, "she mightn't be so friendly like." She huddled into her corner, and tilted her brilliant toque as far forward as it would go, furtively watching her find, who seemed so startlingly out of place in these parts. "This time o' night too, and the streets full of us. I wonder if she knows a thing. It's amazin' 'ow they get that look, and 'ow they keep it moreover. Oh Lord!"

She sighed hugely, for no earthly reason that she knew of, and by the time they reached the Row her rollicking face had grown paler and solemn. She looked like a dejected poppy, and felt a disposition to sigh again.

When the cab pulled up, Margaret was caught in Mrs. Bent's shaking arms, and hurried into the front room. Then Poll—that was her christened name, she had dropped her other some time since—stepped over to the driver and snubbed him scornfully as she handed him his fare. She then turned nervously to the open door, more than half-inclined to make off and leave her cloak,—a fine deep red it was, too, with gilt clasps.

But Margaret was looking eagerly out for her from the sofa. The girl went to her mechanically.

"Them eyes draw like snakes," she observed parenthetically to herself, as she slouched up awkwardly.

She attempted a little mock curtsey to Mrs. Bent as she passed her, and made a feeble feint of tossing her head, but

all the same she winced painfully under the old woman's swift, shocked scrutiny.

"Oh, I'm done for now!" she thought. "The old 'un 'll blab!" and she wished to mercy she was back in the street.

"She's been most awfully good to me," Margaret explained hurriedly, to stave off the tempest which she perceived was imminent from Mrs. Bent's hard set face. Though why it should be so, she had not a notion; she was as yet not very learned in these matters. "I don't know what I should have done but for her help. I got dizzy, and got into an omnibus. It was the first thing that came by. The noise made me worse, and I got out to get a cab, I think, and I remember nothing more. You must have carried me bodily into that cab we came in." She caught hold of Poll's hand, bursting through its brown kid. "Thank you ever so much. Please tell me your name, and where you live; and you'll come and see me again, won't you?"

"My name is Poll Smith, and I live in Broad Street, Number 15," said the girl, with mendacious alacrity.

The inhabitants of Number 15 were godly folk, who wouldn't have touched her with a pair of tongs; but she had a "down" on the family for some reason of her own, and always made free with their address.

"Lor! won't they be proud and pleased, with their chapel-goin' imperince!" she had thought as the joke had first struck her.

"But you'll never find it, miss," she continued, with a twinge of compunction. Somehow, she didn't feel like making a fool of this unusual acquaintance. "Maybe I'll look in of an evening. Y' seem bad, to be sure. I'd as well clear."

With an odd impulse, she caught Margaret's hand in both hers and gave it a jerky squeeze; then she put it carefully back on the pillow and made for the door.

"My cloak—oh! thanks, miss, I was a-forgettin' of it."

"Here's the fare, young woman, as you were kind enough

to pay for my young lady," said Mrs. Bent stiffly, waylaying her.

Margaret sprang up, but had to sink back again, and she felt too choked and dizzy to say a word. The girl crimsoned violently and threw up her head.

"I don't want yer money, if I am the dirt under yer feet. I have a right to spend *my* money as I like. Ye can keep yer own fur them as wants it—or fur yerself; it might keep ye a day or too longer off the Parish." She slammed the door in her face. "Oh, the old varmint!" she muttered, adding as an axiom in her philosophy, "I 'ates women, I does, like p'isin."

She turned into the corner pub. to refresh herself, arrange her flaming face before the glass, and put her toque in its proper place—as far back as possible, hanging on to one hair or so.

"Mrs. Bent, how could you?" said Margaret angrily. "I didn't think it was in you to treat any one in such a way."

"Miss Margaret, dear," she cried, with a choking in her voice, "I couldn't bear you should take such ill-gotten gains as that young woman's."

She shuddered and looked very old. She had memories. She had been all these years in this dingy street with the faint hope that some day there might come back, and find her always waiting here, her youngest, the only one she had saved out of seven.

"And to see you—you—child—in such company—it gave me a turn! Child, take your tea. You know so little, dear."

"I think I know so much," said Margaret wearily. "The world seems nothing but sorrow and sin—and tiredness. My head is simply awful. I'll go to bed. Mrs. Bent," she began again, when the old woman had helped her into bed, "do you think she'll come back?"

"I hope to the Lord she won't!"

There was a sort of cry in her voice. She turned sharply away, and went into the kitchen to prepare something for Margaret.

"Sorrow and sin—sorrow and sin," she murmured, as she moved brokenly about.

"Perhaps, dear, I was hard," she said, as she brought the little white-covered tray. "But none but the Lord Himself knows the heart's bitterness. It was through the like of her that I lost my youngest and my best. Child, what is it?"

She put her tray on the table and laid her hand on Margaret's head.

"Nothing," she said, with chattering teeth, "only I'm cold—deadly cold. I'll be all right when I get warm again."

But Mrs. Bent knew better. As soon as the shivering had turned to burning heat, and she had fallen at last, tired out, into a restless sleep, Mrs. Bent put on her things and went for the doctor.

"It had to come," she told herself, as she made her way nervously through the streets, "with a fierce young heart full of trouble, and naught to bring comfort. I wonder why the Lord sees fit to tarry!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HER adventure with the young woman with lashes that beat her own made a deep impression on Poll. She thought of her in spurts Haymarketwards, and, more or less, all that night and the next day. She couldn't "chuck 'er off nohow."

In the evening she took a long round, so that she might pass the little house and give "a squint in." But she saw more than she bargained for. Just as she came up a doctor was disappearing inside the door.

With a pang that made Poll wonder "wot had come to her wotever," she slipped up to the window, which was wide open, planted her face against a pane, and listened with might and main.

She heard everything, and through a flaw in the blind she saw Margaret's burning face tossing on the pillow, and her dry lips muttering. She also saw the doctor's grave face, and the fear on Mrs. Bent's as she watched him.

Poll uttered one of her windy sighs, and went up the street. As she turned the corner, she bethought her of a drop of "comfort," and wavered, but she went on again.

"'Twill only make me 'otter, and it's a steamin' night. Bah! I don't want no money. I'm flush enuff. I'm dog-tired, moreover."

Night after night, on the road West, she took her stand near the little house, hanging round till she saw the doctor approaching; then she would make for the window and listen, slinking off before he came out.

But one night she waited till after he had gone, for she had heard him say something about "death," and that was a word that always made her "afeard of 'erself," and reckless

as to anything else. She walked restlessly about the street, hovered round the house, and stood, minutes long, listening at the door. At last, egged on by that hideous word, she tapped softly, then made as if to run away. But she came back and waited a long time—hours it seemed to her—while Mrs. Bent rose from her tired knees and wiped her eyes.

At last the door was opened. When she saw who it was, Mrs. Bent half-closed it again, but paused, and was about to say some hard thing with a hard voice when a sudden memory caught and silenced her. She threw the door open, and said huskily,—

"What may you want, young woman?"

"Be 'er a-goin' to die?" blurted out Poll.

"None but God can tell. She's sick unto death, the doctor says. How do you come to know of it, girl?" she demanded, sternly.

Poll made no answer. She gulped something down, and turned to go, but with one foot on the threshold she turned round again, and back into the passage.

"Might I stop, ma'am?" she said, half fiercely, half bashfully. "I'll not touch nothink, that ain't my line. I might wash up the dishes, or run arrants, or fetch the doctor, or such."

Mrs. Brent looked at her in amazement and dubious silence, and was on the point of sending her about her business when a moan from Margaret fetched her instantly into her room.

When she came back, Poll was standing where she had left her, with her head bent and her hands clasped tightly, as a sort of dumb protest that she neither pried nor prigged. There was an impudent air of supplication in every line of her.

Mrs. Bent raked her from stem to stern, and a big struggle began in her mind. At first it went dead against Poll's chances, but bitterness and disgust gave place at last to patient, mournful, hopeless pity.

"Take off yer cloak, girl, and bide." This was her ver-

dict. "It makes little matter to her now who goes or stays," she muttered, as she went back to the bed-side, leaving Poll to her reflections.

Those reflections, to judge by her cast of countenance, were anything but agreeable. The silent room, with its subdued light, the feeble flickering fire, with ever and anon a weary moan to wake the echoes, or a shred of murmured prayer, were awful in the extreme to the girl, and brought back to her a deal she would gladly have forgotten.

They brought to her mind her mother as she lay dying in her cottage in Hampshire, telling her between her racking fits of coughing "to be good," and to "take care of herself;" and she wished in a foggy way that she had taken her advice. Then she set to meditate on less wholesome matters,—on her father, and the woman he had brought in to live with him, and she with a husband of her own too, before their mother was cold in her grave. Then there arose a faint vision of "Bill," with his big red face, and his two little eyes looking out of their hills of fat; but they were honest little eyes, and used to beam on her cheerily. Then another pair of eyes, that used just to eat her up, and which finally ousted "Bill." She left him among his ridges, and wandered up to London with her shame upon her and the neighbours jeering. She soon "chucked that off anyhow," she thought, with a touch of defiance, bred of memories best known to herself. A merrier life soon set in. She could laugh and grow fat at her ease, and wear "clo'es that would have made their hair curl."

Here a moan, a long-drawn moan of horror and fear, shut Poll's reflections up.

"I wish I 'adn't been such a bloomin' ass as to come 'ere!" she muttered, casting her restless eyes fearfully into the corners. "I ain't wanted—I'll clear."

She half rose to go, but something took hold of her and pulled her down again into her chair. There was another moan. A coal in the fire suddenly flared up and spat out at her, as if it had been a devil, a long, thin, blue tongue of flame, and in the lurid light, for the first time in her thought-

less existence, she caught a glimpse of her calling as it looks to other people's eyes.

An impotent restlessness stirred her. She twisted on her chair and craned her neck, so that she could see the bed and the wide vacant eyes staring at the ceiling, and the uneasy hands picking jerkily at the bed-clothes, and Mrs. Bent down on her knees trembling with suppressed sobbing.

Margaret threw up her arms wildly and shrieked; her passive state had give place to ungovernable delirium. She grew each moment as strong as iron. Poll soon saw that Mrs. Bent was no match for her. She stood up, longing and fearing, but truly thankful for any distraction. The old woman struggled stoutly, to keep her away; but her wrists were feeble, she could hold out no longer.

"Come and help me, girl!" she cried desperately at last.

Poll went with a sort of skip. She was, at first, as awkward as a bear, and gave Margaret a bruise or two. Mrs. Bent said nothing, but wished her well out of the way. Her one consolation was that she "was no rougher than a neighbour would have been," and that, in her case, she needn't worry about politeness.

In the beginning Poll was far too excited to be the least aware of her roughness, but once, in holding down Margaret's arm, she gave it a wrench, and made her cry out like a little child "crying in the night."

Poll started back. The sound woke up some dead old pain that made her cold, and the shock forced a tenderness into the big coarse hands never born or bred in them. Before the night was over she had succeeded in gaining a word of half-grudged approval from Mrs. Bent.

Night after night she came, and sat patiently waiting until there should be need of her. She could not tell herself why she came. She would occasionally observe to herself apologetically "that she were druv." She was often tired, and always awfully bored, but she never "let on" to Mrs. Bent. She wouldn't give her that "satisfaction." And, indeed, Mrs. Bent took precious little notice of her in any of her moods, for it was only her own unfortunate want of

strength that ever made her and her morals, even for the minute, supportable. Otherwise, she was a mere irritating eyesore, and a reproach.

For whenever Margaret was quiet for any length of time, the woman's religious instincts would bristle up and prick her laxness. Here was a brand blazing up right under her nose, as though demanding to be snatched, and she never felt equal to putting forth a finger in its direction. She was so tired, and the brand looked so cheerful—so absolutely irresponsible.

After a whole day's thought, when there was no more hope, Mrs. Bent wrote to Miss Dering—a long letter, full of details. She told not only of the present, but of the future —what she would do "after," in case they should not come in time; and she sent Poll to post it.

Poll had a little business of her own on at the same time, and did not post it till she had got to Piccadilly.

The letter was a weight off Mrs. Bent's mind; she felt she had done her duty, and given "them as owned her" their chance, even though they little deserved it.

One night Poll did not come, and Mrs. Bent discovered, for the first time, how invaluable to her she had been. This set her musing concerning the girl generally, and she found she had done worse than miss a "holy chance." She had let the young hearty thing work hard, night after night, without giving her so much as a bite or sup, or even a "thank you." She felt down-stricken to think she hadn't even thrown her a prayer. The forgetfulness about the food, however, touched her more keenly. She was a clear-headed old woman often,—that is, when she could get loose from hereditary instincts,—and she was well aware that snatching brands was, on occasion, a most invigorating and pleasant pastime—for the snatchers; it gave them such a delightful prominence; it was, in fact, frequently a fine showy form of spiritual pride.

When Margaret was quiet for a few minutes, Mrs. Bent went into her own room and drew out an old box-bed. She shook up the flock mattress and took the feather pillow

from her own bed, leaving there a flock one, and laid clean sheets and blankets on the bed. She went to the drawer where lay her Sergeant's coat, with the stripes and his medals, and drew out a patchwork quilt, which Nancy had made, and which she never could bear to look at. She laid it with trembling hands on the little bed; and this was her penance.

The next night Poll came in, shamefaced and jaunty, with a tendency to head-tossing, and in her hands a costly bunch of orchids. She thrust them under Mrs. Bent's nose, and explained with a nervous grin that she got them for "'er."

"Put them on the table; set down, and take your tea."

Poll was astonished to find a tray prepared for her, as clean as if it had been "for t'other one, and a sight fuller, thanks be to God."

"Lor!" she remarked, and stared at Mrs. Bent.

Then she fell to with a will. She had hardly had a morsel all day; she had put the best part of her coin into the orchids.

"Look here, girl," said Mrs. Bent, when she had finished, "I have made you up a bed in my room. And you can put your things in them drawers. I missed you sore yesternight."

"I'll stay," said Poll, after a dazed pause, "till her's——"

"And them flowers—are they fit-gotten posies to give to such as her?"

Poll took them—a whole guinea's worth—and put them behind the fire. The next minute she felt she "could pull the old 'un's nose." But by this time the flowers were shrivelled and black.

Mrs. Bent went back to Margaret, while Poll still watched her flowers with surly regret, and wondered if she "was goin' rantin' ragin' mad."

CHAPTER XIV.

ONE morning, when Hyde came in to breakfast, he noticed that there was rather a strange look about his wife. Probably she had had enough of racketing, and had better go down to the country. There wasn't anything to do there yet, certainly ; but as far as he was concerned, a change of any sort would be a relief.

"When would you like to go down?" he asked, in a dutiful voice, as he chipped his egg.

"Whenever you like—I am quite ready any time. It's getting very hot here."

She spoke absently and rather faintly. He concluded it had something to do with the baby ; she had probably been up with it after she had come home last night. He wished, in rather a bored, listless way, that she wouldn't worry quite so much about the poor little chap. He took up the paper, slightly frowning. Not a word of interest in two columns—everything was a bore. He read on, his eyes straying once or twice, and he wondered vaguely when he should again begin to take an intelligent interest in any mortal subject. This vegetable living was as degrading as it was unexciting. He had had enough of it.

When his wife stood up to leave the room, he did not notice her until she was just at the door ; then he jumped up hurriedly to apologise and hold it open for her. He was as punctilious in all the little things as a schoolboy on his good behaviour.

"Will you read this?" she said, in her even tones, giving him a letter.

Then she went away down the hall with her eyes on the ground. He watched her curiously—she was ghastly white

this morning; or was it only a reflection of the general colourlessness of all things? This time he was quite certain that her voice was faint.

"Good Lord, what a grind it all is!" he muttered, as he unfolded the letter. "And what on earth is this?"

When he found out, he no longer felt in the least like a vegetable. He was now quite alive; life of a most unpleasant order was surging, throbbing, rushing through his veins. It was a letter from Miss Dering to Beatrice, informing her, in that lady's own scriptural language, and with characteristic comments, that Margaret Dering was dead.

He read the letter twice, leant for a minute shivering against the door, then took up his hat and went out.

He often wondered afterwards how he put that day through, and if, at any moment of it, he had made a visible fool of himself. But he felt pretty sure he really had not looked an atom more bored than the half-dozen men he had come across in the course of his walk to the club. Why he went there he could not imagine, certainly with no intention of going in. He dined at a little club down the river, and when he came home it was late.

As he was passing his wife's dressing-room, he thought he heard a sound. He wondered vaguely if the child were ill, and knocked; but as no answer came, he opened the door softly and looked in. He saw a sight that staggered him. His wife was kneeling by the sofa, her long, dark hair tumbling about her, and she was sobbing in a low, tired way, as if she had been at it for ever so long. He had never seen her cry, or known her to do so; he hadn't a notion she even knew how to. He stopped, holding his breath. She stirred slightly, and he began to catch little whispers of—

"Geoffrey, poor Geoffrey! poor boy! Oh, it's dreadful! —dreadful for every one of us!"

He heard the words distinctly; there was no mistaking them. Without a sound he drew back, went down again, and, seizing his hat, he made for the street.

"Good Lord! what are women made of? If she cared *for me I might* understand,—they forgive everything, so I'm

told ; but when she doesn't care a hang, it's most—most embarrassing ! "

He stopped to light a cigar, then he turned into a little quiet square, where there was a seat outside the railings, erected by a benevolent gentleman, near a fountain. He sat down, puffing savagely, and grimly reflecting on the situation. He had been absolutely unstrung and irrational all that day ; his thoughts had been a mere insane jumble. But gradually the spirit of death and night brought him a gentler mood, and he ordered himself, and treated his manhood more reverently, and things cleared up a little—to his own mind at least.

He had never quite known, until he had read that letter, how strong his love for Margaret Dering had grown, or how intimate a part of himself it had become. Her death seemed to alter nothing ; it only seemed to strengthen his love, to make it more enduring, unalterable, inexorable. It had been at first, now that he dared to think of it dissectingly, a mere sensuous exaltation of feeling, an extraordinary, delicious excitement. But now he seemed to himself to love the best part of her with the best part of himself, and that he must love her like this as long as his body held breath. It was a state of things, it seemed to him, that no law of God or man could alter. It was the working of God's own leaven in a man's soul. If it was a sin, then it must be sinned, that was all. It was at least—of this he was as certain as that the water was splashing monotonously behind him—no longer a vulgar, silly sin, as his running away with her had been. He did that before he had known what love was. He had fallen to his senses then, not to love. If this was sin it was, at the same time, in some mysterious way, a holy thing, because it was true, and the best part of himself.

When his wife came into the order of his meditations, it struck him that she would make an excellent friend, she was so staunch, so broad in her freedom from all mean womanlinesses. He gave a short laugh and shivered as he thought of her funny irritating conventionalities and little racial limits, and then—that set of her lips.

"But I've got to," he said. "Margaret distinctly said, I had to, and this makes it more than ever necessary. It's too beastly shabby to go back on a promise as things now stand, as bad as breaking a promise to a dead mother."

It struck him, as he unwillingly wondered how the friendship would fare, that the grief of Beatrice for him in his loss was a wonderful thing, and that no man could quite grasp its significance,—it was so many-sided; so he resolved therefore not to try to understand it, but to allow that, blindly, in her own prim way, Beatrice was a great woman. And after all, her grief showed infinitely more nobility than if she had loved him, and a singular insight too, more indeed than he had any notion that she possessed, considering that personally she could know nothing either of love or of anguish.

"Margaret, my own, my dear little one! my love for you is the one thing I have to hold on to," he said to himself, standing up and leaning over the railings. "And I'll try—I'll try, dear, all I know, never to do anything to shame it. Ah well! Beatrice is a good woman—she deserves a better fate!" he said, as he turned at last to go home.

It was near midnight when he got there. He listened as he passed Beatrice's door and stopped.

"Shall I go in or not?" he said. "I'll go in," he decided. "She must be lonely there thinking things over, and I've done her an awful wrong, take it as you will. And that baby—the poor little chap is a lot too small to fill a woman's heart. If it had been a natural, proper-sized little beast, it might have been of more use in that way."

All traces of tears had vanished from Beatrice's face, her hair was done to a turn, and she was sitting straight up in a high-backed chair; she was never one of those comfortable women, whose instincts lead them naturally to pleasant seats; thanks to her grandmother, she always bore about her the echo of a backboard, physically, morally, and mentally. In no part of her being could she ever enjoy the delicious bliss of a lounge, so stiff was she from head to heel *with principles.*

She looked particularly prim and cold, but Geoffrey hardly noticed it; he only saw the weariness of her face and the subdued look of pain in it.

"How fagged you look!" he said. "You should rest on your off nights. They're rare enough, Heaven knows. Do you think you will be ready to go home this week?"

"Quite ready." She was painfully conscious that her lips trembled and that her face got hot. He had never called the old place home since the first month after their marriage. "I shall say good-night; I am tired, I think," she said, and standing up she gave him a courteous little nod of dismissal.

"Beatrice, I saw you this evening," he said hurriedly. "It was good of you to be sorry in such a case. In fact, I think it was really great of you. You are singularly loyal. I have done you a great injury. It was through no fault of mine that it wasn't the greatest that a man can do his wife. But I'm inclined to think I did you even a greater the day I married you. That cousinly love is a snare, and entrapped us both. We took it for the other thing."

She looked at him and listened to his gentle deprecations in silent wonder, and for a minute she was possessed by a sort of interested admiration for herself. Was she really so skilled an actress—had he never once had any idea of the truth? She knit her brows sharply and took a quick glance at him.

Had the other love given him no clue? Was the love that throbbed like fire in her heart in no way akin to that which was buried in the other girl's? Was it a world that divided them, or an idea?

She drew a quick breath, and a maddening impulse beset her to tell him the truth; the minute after, she knew that such truths were never told in words.

"Yes," she said, "cousinly love is a snare."

"But it does not prevent friendship. I have been thinking to-night that you are the stuff of which men make friends. Will you be my friend? A fellow is better for the friendship of a good woman."

Her eyes dilated on him. She wondered why any woman should fear death or any other thing when she has to face life and live with men. Well, marriage steadies the nerves if it does nothing else. She gave a short, low laugh, which mystified him in his turn.

"Yes," she said, "I will be your friend."

"And Friday we will go home?"

"And Friday we will go home," she repeated mechanically. "Good-night, Geoffrey."

Her heart seemed to be moving about in her in a strange way; it had never done so before, and the room seemed to be floating away from her. She was getting foolish—insane, perhaps—and a horrid notion was seizing her that the dead girl was blocking the door.

"Can't he jump over her," she thought, "and leave me? If he can't, I shall die. Can't he jump over her, and go——"

She stood where he had left her for a full minute after he had shut the door, struggling feebly against the queer rigid pain, the dizziness, the foolish rush of pictures before her eyes. A curious horror of falling made her grope her way back into her chair; and it was quite half an hour before she was able to sit straight again and think rationally.

CHAPTER XV.

ONE day, the little white baby died. Beatrice neither cried nor strove, but she knew that a good deal of the best part of her had gone with it.

Hyde was infinitely gentle and pitiful—in an unspoken fashion, of course. He was wise enough to hold his tongue. When he watched her looking dry-eyed on the dead child, he understood quite clearly for the first time that cousinly love was not her only speciality, and he wished vaguely that she had married a man who could have aroused the capacity for any other sort of love she might have about her, and have given it some sort of a show. If she would only cry or moan, or be the smallest atom foolish or disagreeable,—if even she would get a headache; but to go about the house just as usual, and never even to mention the infant. It certainly was embarrassing.

This friendship of theirs wasn't up to much, he felt, whenever he looked at her in those days.

Dunstone Manor was a sombre, magnificent mass of stone buildings, set in a quadrangle and half surrounded with a moat, the waters of which, regardless of sanitary principles, came right up to the east walls.

Beatrice had always had a strange affection for the sheet of dark waters, flecked with lilies, but it was hardly the place to revive a woman's spirits when she was brooding over a dead baby—and other things. Her husband often shivered as he watched her walking beside the waters.

For decency's sake they gave up their visits, but when Geoffrey proposed that the September shooting parties should also be given up, she said distinctly, No, and took

her part in organising more extensive preparations than usual for them.

She was a serene, prim, magnificent hostess to his friends. Not a man among them but felt better for being near her, even though the air about her was rarefied and chill, with a tendency at times to cause a slight chokiness. And more than one among the wiser hearts ached in silence for the fine, white, courageous creature.

As for the women, they had very little patience with her, and objected to have their sympathies returned on their hands in that gentle, grateful, well-bred way of hers, that had the effect of at once taking the wind out of their sails. Never once did she speak of her baby, though it had not been in its grave six weeks, and although several of her guests were well up in such afflictions, and felt perfectly competent to deal with them. It was an insolent neglect of skilled labour, and small wonder they resented it.

When the house was empty again Beatrice returned to her daily drives and her moat, and Hyde plunged into his landowner's duties. They were an immense relief to both of them, and no doubt of some benefit to the tenantry.

Hyde had a simple theory, and he stuck to it. He worked up from drains to morals, instead of contrariwise, and he expected little in the way of progress. His course of duty was not, therefore, cut short in its callow youth by disappointed sentiment. He had, besides, an experimental turn. It became a bore to him to gaze, day after day, on the round, fatuous, half-awake faces of his cottagers, which neither drains, clubs, reading-rooms, nor lectures seemed to any large extent to influence. So it occurred to him to try what new blood would do. This he imported from the slums, in the shape of convalescents, which he sowed broadcast over the neighbourhood, until the song of the coster, in all its native purity, was heard in the land; and Geoffrey awaited results.

They came in due time in the thinning of hen-roosts, and in the fact that now the Arcadian, besides thumping his own wife, was known on occasion to make love to his neigh-

bour's. Into the bargain a few fresh oaths, of a more sanguinary and lurid hue than those in ordinary circulation, got abroad in the parish, and a few feeble tries were made at setting afloat a sort of bastard atheism there. The new blood, in fact, disseminated its smaller sins freely, but left nothing behind of its eager wide-awake keenness of living—on other people,—whenever possible.

Geoffrey also tried silos, and at times felt an overpowering desire to pot villagers in them. Truly life was a huge bore, and doing one's duty was rather more demoralising, while being less agreeable, than going to the devil.

To Beatrice—who had no sense of humour—her husband as a model landlord and an upholder of the traditions of their house was a solemn joy, and he had besides now so little time to wonder what she was thinking about.

She had decided not to hunt that season; and as spring came on he thought once or twice that she was whiter than usual, and getting thin. She herself was sure of it.

CHAPTER XVI.

"EITHER what woman, having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it?"

The words had just been read out from a pulpit in an old, staid, solid, and most hideous church in the west central of London, and the man who read them was big, broad, and awkward-looking, with good eyes, and a fine uncompromising look about his mouth. He had a curious, sudden, little hook to his nose that accentuated his eager eyes. His hands were capable and sinewy, but he made little show with them, and he was altogether too much in earnest to pay attention to his attitudes.

When he had read the text, he put down the Bible and took stock of his congregation. It was made up mostly of respectable, pious-minded folk, as a rule neither hot nor cold, well-satisfied and well-fed—chiefly with solids and a large proportion of fat. They were people who, to an alarming extent, fried their meat. They lived in the sedate squares and "genteel places" all about the neighbourhood. They prided themselves on the thickness of their walls and their chimney-pieces. It was hardly a gathering of souls to touch with living fire.

The preacher involuntarily shook his head and smiled before he began.

"Here we have a woman—a careless creature, who has lost a piece of silver. If she was careless, however, she at least knew the greatness of her loss, and she meant at any rate to get her treasure back again. She might have set to work to do this in many ways. She might have dropped *comfortably* into a chair to weep and lament. She might

have called in the neighbours to talk it over; to chorus her lamentations.

. . . . . .

"This woman of old Syria did none of these things. Through her own fault she had lost her silver piece, and she meant to find it. She had no time to sit still, or to talk with her neighbours, or to revile her household. There was her silver piece waiting to be found. Her silver piece, I said; but it was not hers in very truth. It was but given her in charge by the good man of the house, to restore to him when he demanded it of her, undefiled and undefaced. So she lit her candle, not daring to trust to her own dim vision; she swept the house carefully, that no spot might remain unsearched, and she sought diligently till she found it.

"You may remark that she never doubted for one minute that ultimately she would find it, and she determined that no one but herself should be the finder. She knew that it was somewhere about, merely fallen or misplaced, but in substance and value unchanged. No matter how thick might be the layer of dust that hid it from sight, how ingrained the filth, how foul the rust,—for was it not a silver piece, stamped with the image of the king?

"There is another careless woman, who has lost many silver pieces, and is every day losing more. That woman is the Church of God, and her lost pieces are the souls of men and women. Many are only mislaid, and she will find them again, but some of them are lost out of her hands for ever. Some have rolled into dark corners, under cumbrous rubbish heaps. Some have fallen into pits, or rolled into dens. Some are trodden under foot, and are forgotten. Some again have lain so long in the darkness and mire that they are fearful, and tremble in the face of the light.

. . . . . .

"And what is this careless woman, this mother of men, doing to find her lost pieces? Is she lighting her candle humbly—not daring to trust her own dim vision? Is she sweeping lowlily, faithfully, hopefully—sweeping in mire and muck, in den and pit, with faith removing mountains?

My dear friends, to a very large extent she is talking and drinking tea and sitting on committees."

The congregation were getting very shaky about this man's soundness; his unvarnished manner of speech and his quiet voice, which, as it was singularly clear, he rarely found it necessary to raise above its ordinary level, pleased them even less than his sentiments. They were used to flowers of rhetoric, and they had got them inextricably mixed into the plan of salvation as it struck them. They felt convinced that this plain uneventful discourse indicated a screw loose somewhere, most probably in a loose mind.

However, he had set their critical faculty agog, and that at least was something.

"Yes, my friends, she is talking, she has indeed been talking for many centuries—with what result? She has filled her churches—or some of them—mostly with women and children; some not even with these. Many of these people, too, who flock to church take their weekly worry of prayer and praise as they do the other bores of life, with passing decorum,—unless, indeed, they make some use of the time, and arrange it in their work for the coming week. Many snooze—not, indeed, as comfortably as they used to do; the make of the new pews unhappily forbids that. Some are on the war path—mote-hunting.

"'We eat and drink,
And fume and plot,
And go to church on Sunday;
And many are afraid of God,
And more of Mrs. Grundy.'

Many even flock weekly or monthly to the Supper of the Lord, and yet some of these people have never for one hour been with Christ.

. . . . . .

"Many of these pieces who shine here to-night, and in the other churches, shine with a false glitter, and there's not *a trace* of the King's face to be seen, for in theirs it is lost

under the gloss and the glitter. Are these pieces, I ask you, less lost than if they lay an inch thick under the dust?

. . . . . .

"Friends, we have done wrong, all of us, and none more than we, the lowly servants of the great Church. . . . Brethren, there are men out there now in the streets, rogues, vagabonds, murderers, whoremongers, liars; they are all silver pieces—gone astray. And we are, each and all of us, more or less responsible for their loss—and for their finding. Our means for doing this have indeed mostly been weighed in the balance, and found wanting; but we must only work on as well as we know, and improve our machinery.

"Sisters, there are women walking out there in the streets, not just now, but a little later, whom you will pass swiftly, and feign not to see. When one of these women approaches, the man at your side—your husband, your brother, your lover—will carefully draw your attention away, lest you should see and understand. And yet every one of these women, my friends, is a silver piece, stamped with the image of the King.

"And you, my dear men, who are, and quite rightly, too, so careful to guard your own womenkind, when all is said that can be said, how many of us in London to-day, if the Bible is to be taken at its word at all, hasn't at one or other moment of his existence stood on a hardly higher level than these poor lost pieces? The words of the text are plain enough—read for yourselves St. Matthew, the fifth chapter, twenty-eighth verse. What adult man can sit under the searching light of that text and feel absolutely unashamed?"

Here he stopped. The congregation thought it was high time, and wished the Vicar could have heard him. You never could tell what those borrowed curates were about to say. One matron, having in the meantime looked up that text, prayed for him that evening after a late meat tea.

"Oh, Miss Margaret, God bless 'im!" said Poll, snatching spasmodically at Margaret's jacket, and giving it a twitch.

"Poll, don't roar! You should take example by his voice, if you like him so much. We'll talk about it when we get home."

The two had come out together at the call of the bells, Margaret because, although everything went wrong, it was, nevertheless, good to be back in the midst of life again; and Poll came because Margaret did. They had strayed into this church.

When they got home, Margaret went to her room, and Poll, baulked for the minute of her talk, comforted herself by pouring into Mrs. Bent's scandalised ears a rapid epitome of the discourse, freely interlarded with choice adjectives and figures of speech, entirely her own.

"And the passon 'e said, said 'e—'e said as we—us—wor silver pieces, every bloomin' bit as good as them as sits and prays all the Sundays of the year. They ain't much to boast of, neither, for all their gloss and imperince. We're all the dead spit o' t'other, bar the dust and the muck as 'ave got on us. Lor! now, an' 'e a passon!"

"Go and take your things off, Poll, you addle my brain; mayhap Miss Margaret will make it clear to me, but your words and the minister's have got so mixed together in my head that I'm all dazed like, mor'n as if I heard tell of a wild play-acting thing than of a gospel sermon."

"Lor, Mrs. Bent!" began Poll, in eager deprecation.

"Poll, the supper's been waiting for half-an-hour. And, girl, brush that fringe flat—it's all on end again."

"'Twon't stick nohow. Goodness gracious! what a piece of work for a few 'airs. Old women is so mortal crabby!" she muttered, as she pretended to herself to straighten the tousled locks.

When the sermon was duly recounted to Mrs. Bent, she pushed her plate sadly away and looked at Margaret. She considered it a most improper sermon, she said, and the young man ought to be ashamed of himself. Whatever would his poor mother say, if she could only hear him? she would very much like to know.

CHAPTER XVII.

"MRS. BENT," said Margaret, one evening, suddenly plumping down into a chair opposite her, "if I don't get something to do I shall—explode."

She had been walking about the room for such an unconscionable time that it had begun to strike Mrs. Bent she never intended to be still again; and she was wondering if, in the meantime, she should herself be driven frantic by this constant movement.

"But, mercy on us, child! you have your lessons,—your music, and your singing, and landwidges. What more do you want?"

"I want something to fill up the crowds of idle hours. I can't play and sing and do languages always."

Mrs. Bent dropped a stitch and gave a little sigh.

"I wish, my lamb, I wish you were set in your right place, where your birth have placed you."

"Circumstances have got the better of birth just for the present, as far as position goes, you see. As to my right place, it's with you, you dear, and, no matter what happens or doesn't happen, with you my right place will be always. Say your dear old verse—say it directly, and don't look like that."

"'Whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge,'" said Mrs. Bent obediently, softly folding her hands, as her mother had taught her to do always when she spoke Bible words.

"It should be the other way about, shouldn't it? It is I, the younger, who should say it to you, the elder. However, it's just as well; I couldn't honestly finish the text. I'm just

now in too much of an insane muddle. Of course," she began again, "we both know that when I am twenty-one I must reconsider things all round. I am not so foolish as to be ignorant of the advantages of being rich; nor am I sufficiently silly not to be quite aware that it is unnecessary for me to remain hidden, so to speak, for any very long period. We, Geoffrey and I, had to get time to think things out separately and sensibly, that was all; and I shall never regret coming to you, Mrs. Bent, even though complications, which you won't like at all, have grown up about my coming here."

"My dear, what do you mean?"

"I'll tell you directly. I have to put square and straighten up things first, just to let our minds know how we stand. You see, although you told my aunts I was next door to dead, they never came near me, even with prayer and warning. Under the circumstances, I should have thought Aunt Katherine would have swooped down at once, like a raven on a carcase. However, they have washed their hands of me and have left me to the Lord with a vengeance. So even if I wanted to go back to them I couldn't—at any rate, I am hardly wise enough to return just yet; so that I want you to keep me till I am twenty-one. And then we'll go away for a time to nice, cosy, warm lands, where you will grow young again. But when I go to rough, cold places I shall leave you to mind my house. We shall have very nice times, I assure you—with exceptions, you know."

Mrs. Bent looked at her, and wished she would say at once what it was. It was something dreadful, she felt positive; she was already cold at the bare thought of it.

"I have been thinking a great deal about things lately, and it's quite clear to me I must do some definite thing to get rid of time. You don't understand the simmering that's going on in me, and that will certainly boil over unless it's seen to. Rest is pleasant to you, because you have earned your rest. I haven't begun to earn mine. I have never done a thing to tire myself yet, and I can't, then, in conscience, sit down to rest. You see, thinking is such a

wretched bother, so very unsatisfactory, and perhaps a little wrong. I must keep my thoughts in order and in their proper place—that is, not revolving altogether round myself and Geoffrey. Then I seem to myself to have a lot of empty holes to fill up, and if I get accustomed to emptiness, you see, I will soon be no better than an animal half paralysed, with just enough life left in it to eat and ache. Languages somehow don't meet the case, neither does singing. I should have liked to do something for the neighbours, although, at the same time, I should have considered myself rather impertinent for interfering; but it seems the right thing to work for the poor; the testimony of hosts of books goes to prove it, and also to prove the delights of the resulting sensations to yourself and to them. But you see that our particular poor, unless I turn myself inside out for their information, will have none of me. If I wore a uniform, of course, or came over once a week from some unknown quarter westward, it would be different; but in Danby Row, and living with you, it won't do. That woman with the sick baby simply turned me out; she also called me a 'limb.' I'm 'an 'orty 'ussy' to the rest, and if they know nothing of me—well, they think a lot, as you quite well know. Being then scorned by the respectable, Mrs. Bent, I think I must do something for the unrespectable. I want to help some of those silver pieces." She carefully kept her eyes from seeing Mrs. Bent's face.

"My child, my child, you must leave 'em to the Lord! It's all that sermon, that shocking, improper discourse, befitting a little Bethel, or such low place, a main sight better than a respectable house of God."

Mrs. Bent put down her knitting and began to stroke Margaret's hair with shaking hands. She felt that some new horror was to be let loose on her, and if she knitted she would drop all her stitches, and give herself an evening's taking-up.

"Will you come away from here?" Margaret asked, softly,—"only a little way! Just a few streets nearer the thoroughfares where my face isn't known."

She lifted her eyes half-fearfully, and understood vaguely the pain in the old woman's face as far as it regarded herself. What she did not understand was the horror of the old and ignorant of a new start in life, of a fresh plunge into unexplored regions, which is one of the most important factors in the revolt of the aged poor against the poor-house, often indeed against what seem to outsiders the undeniable comforts of small alms houses.

Margaret's heart smote her for the part of the pain she could understand, the part of which she herself was the cause. She pulled the old woman's face down and kissed it, but she repeated her request with soft insistence.

Mrs. Bent's hands shook a little more, but they still stroked her. A miserable certainty, from some indescribable change in Margaret's face, even in the tone of her voice, that she meant all she said, and meant, moreover, to carry out her intentions, was coming upon Mrs. Bent; the feebleness of her own age, of her untaught understanding, pressed sore on her, for she knew, she felt, there was some force driving the young creature, which she was absolutely incompetent to deal with, or even to contend against. Almost involuntarily her hands fell together, and she murmured—

"'Whither thou goest I will go.' But, O Lord, grant this thing may not come to pass!" she added almost inaudibly.

Margaret rubbed her cheek against the shaking old hands, and Mrs. Bent prayed on, vaguely entreating the Lord to avert this disaster.

"They pass here every night," went on Margaret, "cursing and yelling often, and half of them look like children; and in the morning, as I am dressing, they often pass the window, coming home, I suppose; then they look tired, and faded, and old, and somehow as if God had forgotten them altogether. They are often drunk, too, and stagger. We must help them, you and I and Poll."

"Poll, Miss Margaret?"

"*Yes, dear*, Poll. I've heard you say all manner of nice

things about Mary Magdalen, and if this minute she were to appear in the flesh you would dust your best chair, and if your Protestantism didn't hold you back, I am inclined to think you'd go very near kneeling to her. And yet here's Poll, who did likewise, and is now repenting up to her lights, just as Mary did up to hers, and yet——"

"Child, it's altogether different——"

"Of course it is. Mary Magdalen was a great nature, and she fell from a great height. A little stumble brought Poll down, having no height to speak of to fall from, and yet she too deserves some credit for picking herself up. Then Mary didn't wear a fringe or tight lace, Poll's two leading abominations—it wasn't the fashion then; besides, I don't suppose Mary wanted any improvement, whereas Poll does. Also, Mary looked like an angel through all her sin. On the contrary, Poll does not, though Mary, of course, must have been ten times the greater sinner of the two, everything else about her being so much greater. Then the method of her repentance was so picturesque, with nothing ridiculous about it. Look at her there, in that picture, repenting in a most divine attitude in the desert, with her angel face. As a matter of fact, Poll repenting ungrammatically, and with flaming cheeks and a fringe, in the very teeth of temptation, is quite as praiseworthy a feat; at any rate, it deserves just the least little bit of trust and hope, if the other is now a saint with churches called after her."

"Miss Margaret, my dear, did you give me that picture with an object?" demanded Mrs. Bent a little stiffly.

"No, I didn't. I bought it originally for an object for myself—to put my mind in order, and to raise my ideal of the girls I want to help. They are so fearfully unlike Mary Magdalen as far as looks go. I wanted to get her image set firmly in my mind, in order to keep down my disgust at theirs; so I'm raving on more to convince myself than you. Don't you know you're my one safety-valve? You're not thinking of resigning your office, are you? If you do, the consequences will be terrible."

"My dear, my dear, I'm that confused!"

"So am I," said Margaret. "I'm groping in a dark, cold, howling wilderness, with no guide. Do you know, Mrs. Bent, that numbers of those girls have borne babies, little white, soft, innocent creatures, born branded, to suffer all their lives; and if they in their turn bear children they too will suffer, and so right on to the end of time. The wages of sin is death, that is right and just; but that the wages of sin should be birth, that is awful, it is unjust. That perhaps for the moment's foolishness or madness of a girl, which she perhaps repents all her life, a little child should be born into shame and suffering—it is atrocious! Let the girl suffer if you like, but the little baby! It is a horrid thing to realise, but directly one has done so one feels as if one must go straight off to do something to prevent such things happening."

Mrs. Bent watched her in dumb pain, wishing for words and knowledge fitter to the occasion; but having the wretched consciousness of possessing neither, she held her peace.

"And now I'm going to be altogether selfish, poor dear! I'm going to make you pull up all your roots, and plant them in another place, just to help me on with a project that I feel certain you think will land me somehow in destruction. Those girls, with their lives and their poor ruined babies, haunt me; and those others—those young ones, who have as yet done no wrong, those who have lately left school, and are completing their education at the street corners—these haunt me ever so much more. I thought *at first* only of these; it seems so much pleasanter to come near girls who are still good—that is, not actually bad; but I don't see how one could manage it here. They're all so mixed up together, and if one begins by questions and 'prying,' as Poll calls it, she says that they'll just laugh and march off. So you see I've tried to be quite respectable, and sift. Mrs. Bent, I sometimes wonder that women don't often fall down and die from sheer fear of their womanhood and its dreadful powers. Perhaps the happier ones don't realise them—I *hope* they don't."

Mrs. Bent uttered something between a prayer and a protest in rather a wild way.

"Oh dear! Let me rave on, and then we'll have some more tea and go to bed. It appears there are sets among all classes. Poll says there are 'tip-toppers,' as she calls them —that is, the girls who live in fine houses and wear fine clothes and turn aside from her and her life just as the godly do. The girls I want to do a little bit of something for—I think I hardly know what—are not the 'tip-toppers.' They are often poor, half-starved creatures, who sin because it seems to come as the first natural step in their grown-up life; it's their coming-out, so to speak. It's in their blood, or they're hungry. Poll was hungry at first, that's how she began, and a number of them hanker for something besides the ugliness of their lives. Oh, it's all sordid and altogether horrible! And then they just loathe the asylums, so Poll says, and I don't wonder. Fancy being shut between four walls, to repent by the piece, as the washing is done, and all necessary modern apparatus supplied gratis—chaplain and prayers and hymn-books and good women and words in season all thrown in upon you pell-mell. A bad girl must surely feel about such things as a good one does. And the instruments of grace, Aunt Katherine would call them—Poll speaks of them as 'bosses'—all look too good, or else they're old maids 'as knows nothin' and is always a-pokin' their hignorance at you,' she also says. It seems to me that 'silver pieces' make an astonishing number of remarks about their regenerators; but as I am only a girl perhaps they won't be so sensorious. At any rate, I mean to see."

She stopped from sheer want of breath. Mrs. Bent was rocking herself to and fro and sighing in a gaspy fashion, quite foreign to her gentle ways.

"Miss Margaret, darling," she said at last, "you've been questioning Poll. I wish to the Lord she had never darkened these doors. You, as I tried to keep from the knowledge of what goes on under the very eyes of us all, God help me!—now you know more than I do myself. Thanks be to God, I have kept my eyes shut as far as in me lay.

Child, child! if you could only come right away into the country, where the folks have some respect to themselves—outwardly leastways," she added, with a sigh of reservation.

"I can't go to the country, Mrs. Bent. And why, if the girls lead such lives, should it be your one trouble that I know that they do so? It is a fact that is horrible, not my knowing it. It seems to me every girl should know such things, so that she may be thankful that she herself is good, and not take it as a matter of course. And it is natural, after all, that the young should wish at least to help the young. I hope it is right. At any rate, I feel as if I simply had to. Very likely I shall fail from my utter ignorance of most things. But I'll have one little try."

"My dear, my dear!" murmured Mrs. Bent. She could say no more. She must let the child speak on till the night came, when she would tell the Lord of her trouble, and see on whose side He was in this strange matter.

"We must have a house with one big back room, Mrs. Bent. We have plenty of money."

"But, child, how'll you ever gather the creatures?"

"I'm going with Poll to see some of them. We'll just 'drop in friendly-like,' and I am going to have suppers and things. They are often horribly hungry, and—ignorance may be dark, but oh! the first glimmer of knowledge is a good deal darker! However, perhaps there are chinks in the darkness through which little shreds of light may filter in. I'll try, anyway."

She sat thinking for a few minutes. There was a curious new sweetness about her mouth; the restless look of discontent, that had been taking up its abode in her eyes for some little time past, softened, and she looked as if a wandering ray of light had broken by chance into her own darkness.

As for Mrs. Bent, she was speechless, perplexed beyond words; things had gone altogether too far for her.

Whilst the two sat silent, the one catching stray sunbeams, the other groping among dim shadows, the door *opened and* Poll appeared.

"Hello!" she remarked genially, staring open-mouthed at Margaret. Then she made her way to the back of Mrs. Bent's chair. "Wot's up?" she demanded in an enormous whisper, "wot's up with 'er?"

Mrs. Bent came back from her shadows with great speed, and fell on Poll, who certainly was an irritating object, with her red cloak flopping awkwardly about her heels, and her hat held on crookedly with a long skewer, as she had unfortunately mislaid her pin.

"Poll, girl, don't gape! it isn't manners, as I have many times told you." Then she stooped with quite another face, and looked at Margaret as a mother might on her boy whose ship is to sail on the morrow into strange seas, with sufficient faith in the Lord, but with a secret feeling that she would be a good deal better satisfied if only she knew a little of the geography of those unexplored depths; then she returned to Poll.

"Poll, I thought you minded to get that cloak dipped black," said Mrs. Bent.

If her young lady had slipped out of her hands, Poll hadn't, and the sooner the fact was made clear to her the better. And that cloak was a stigma cast on her honourable household—an abiding eyesore. It seemed as if it were the will of the Lord that she should suffer the girl—but the cloak! That was another matter altogether.

"That cloak, girl, is a scandal."

"'Eavens!" observed Poll to herself, "wot a kettle of fish!"

Margaret had roused herself, and she saw how things were going.

"Poll," she said, "you know yourself that the cloak is frightful. Do take it to-morrow to the French dyers, and you can wear that long brown jacket of mine till it's done. And now for tea. I'm thirsty, and hungry, and a general wreck, and so is Mrs. Bent, and she shall have hot whiskey and water, and lemon, and cloves,—no, cloves go into something else, don't they?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

HYDE and his wife came up to town early in the spring. Directly she saw her husband off the premises, the day after they arrived, Beatrice went out, and did not return till after the luncheon hour. She found then, to her infinite relief, that Geoffrey had not come in. Concluding that he meant to lunch at his club she escaped to her room, threw off her hat and jacket, and was just preparing for a quiet hour with herself, when her maid came to say that Mr. Hyde had arrived, bringing a friend with him, and that he was asking for her. She looked longingly at the fire and her soft wrapper; then she silently put her gown on again and went down.

"You've been out, haven't you?" Hyde asked; "and you're tired. I shouldn't have bothered you to come down, only that I want you to know Mr. Colclough. I daresay you have often heard me speak of him."

She looked up at a tall, gaunt, yellow creature, cadaverous to a degree, with a pleasant mocking look in his eyes that she rather liked, feeling, at the same time, that they were eyes under which one must be on one's guard. She wished for a minute that she were taller and could look into them, instead of being looked down upon by them. While they were waiting for luncheon, Rica Weston came in and invited herself to remain for it.

"If I don't see you now, I may not have the chance for days. Mrs. Hyde, how tired you look! I shall go the instant luncheon is over, and leave you in peace."

"I'm not at all tired, and I hope you will not go," Beatrice said, at the same time wishing that Rica had not come *if she had* meant to take observations.

"Mr. Hyde, that country air of yours isn't up to much—she looks anything but countryish." Rica looked from Beatrice to Colclough with a benevolent motherly air of solicitude.

"Mrs. Hyde," said Colclough, watching both the women in a slow, lazy, interested way, "couldn't we escape anywhere? She has her eye on both of us, and it means beef-tea. It's an awful thing to be the daughter of the Lord Bountiful of a Manor, and to be connected with a curate."

"Come along into luncheon, Miss Weston," said Geoffrey; "we'll give them soup instead of beef-tea. My experience of curates is that they'd benefit vastly, and so would their congregations, if they'd drink their beef-tea themselves instead of emptying it into the bottomless stomach of the poor."

"You speak of a curate as if he were a type, not a man. There are certain differences, even in curates. I could, I assure you, pick one out of a heap and distinguish him from his fellows even with the naked eye."

"But then you're quite abnormally sharp, Miss Weston," Colclough put in.

"But I almost think that even you could. One's first impulse, with many curates, I quite agree with you, is to administer nourishment—fluid for preference. But imagine for a moment plying Frank, for instance, with broth."

"I shouldn't like to imagine it if he is as good a bruiser as he was at Christ's."

"How does he get on with the preaching?" asked Hyde.

"Ask his Vicar," said Rica grimly.

"Or me," said Colclough. "I heard him last Sunday."

"Well, go on."

"Upon my word, I won't; Mrs. Hyde might turn me out, and this game pie is excellent. By the way, Mrs. Hyde, what do you think of Geoffrey's idea?"

"What idea?" she said a little vaguely. Her head was whirling, and she knew that Rica's sharp eyes were still searching her.

She liked Rica, sometimes she went near to loving her,

but she kept aloof from her from a sort of half-shy pride, for some instinct told her that Rica kept the memory of the other girl shut up in the best shrine in her heart, and it came between them.

"They're legion, then, are they? Oh, this latest, I mean, this standing for the county."

Beatrice gave a perceptible start, and looked at her husband. Colclough noticed the sudden spring of eagerness into her indifferent eyes.

"I didn't bother you, Beatrice; I didn't think it would interest you in any sort of way," her husband said.

"Oh!" she said, taking some cream.

"I find anything in the way of politics fetches women," said Colclough. "The mysterious ambiguity of party principles finds an answering chord in their hearts, which, not being homogeneous like other people's, but made up of a fine mosaic of exquisitely fitting pieces, take kindly to puzzles."

"Mrs. Hyde, can you tell me what he is,—from a political point of view, that is? He hasn't a notion himself."

"Surely a Radical," she said, with a contained seriousness peculiarly her own. Opinions were to her matters of quite enormous importance, having been brought up in that way of thinking. It had taken her so long a time to get accustomed to the sight of a Radical about the house, and to reconcile the toleration of it to her conscience and her hereditary instincts, that now to have a sudden doubt cast on the fact gave her a positive shock.

"So I was," said Geoffrey cheerfully, "a rabid one. It was a phase; you must get these things over young, you see, and I've made good use of my time."

Beatrice looked puzzled and unsatisfied.

"What are you now, really, Geoffrey?"

"My dear, I'm a transition, but into what future state, or if into any, I can't really tell you. We are all transitions just now, you see; but then other people have the pull over me in having more imagination and happier knacks of inventing names for their different creeds."

Her face froze a little. Politics were weighty matters, and she never had been able to understand lightmindedness. The white, prim, restrained woman interested Colclough strangely ; he had had so little experience of her like in India, where he had lived since he had left Oxford. He felt inclined really to know her.

"Would you like a political career for your husband, Mrs. Hyde ?"

"I would like nothing better," she said quickly.

"I shouldn't have thought that sort of thing ever entered your head, Beatrice," said Geoffrey, with some half-indifferent surprise.

"I wonder if he knows anything at all about what does enter her head ?" Colclough thought. "I doubt it."

"It seems the natural thing to go into Parliament," she said, in her little conventional way ; "but I don't quite understand your change from radicalism. Will you not have to be more sure of your opinions before you begin to canvass ?" Her eyes watched him with sedate uneasiness.

"I shall probably be less sure by that time, considering the general muddle of things. My first care will be to record my vote against Home Rule,—as the strangely inadequate phrase is now understood—merely to justify my existence ; then I shall look round. You see radicalism, at close quarters, unless you're born to it, or are a professional philanthropist, or an advanced atheist, or have a nonconformist conscience, palls after the early twenties—the modern article, that is. It's too mawkishly sentimental, has altogether too unnecessary a tendency to tears and wailing, for the natural adult man. Then that extraordinary craze for glorifying the coloured races—whether by dirt or nationality, it doesn't matter which to the true Radical—puts one off a bit. After all, even a white man who washes has his feelings. Then the fellows have such an enormous way of looking at a question—their side of it, of course—that it ends in their going in for any form of crudity—but truth. Besides, they talk a deal too much to think soundly. Life's too short for both."

"Conservatism, just now, isn't particularly silent," said Colclough.

"Conservatism's just the same—with a difference, it seems to me. This hateful Irish question has robbed it of a good deal of its magnificent silence, which was its *cachet* to a great extent. Have one of these apples, Jim. They're as cold as winter. Miss Weston, have some Chartreuse. Beatrice, won't you? Why didn't you drive this morning?"

"I wanted a walk."

Rica wondered what made her so pale. Beatrice was a constant worry to her; she wanted so much to know her, she made such frantic sustained efforts to do so; and yet it seemed impossible.

"But," persisted Beatrice, in her gentle, frosty tones, "on what interest will you try to get in, Geoffrey?"

"I shall pledge myself to neither party. I shall be an alternate blister on the side of both."

"Will you tell that to your constituents?" Colclough asked.

"Yes. It's only how you put it."

"I should get in on drains and Christian young men," said Rica,—"no, they're not Christian, they're convalescent, aren't they? I knew there was a C somewhere. Well, on these, and the new cottages, and the Mothers' Meetings and things. Don't you know he's a philanthropist, Mr. Colclough? And his estate is the best managed anywhere."

Beatrice gave her a swift, furtive look of half-suspicious approval. Hyde laughed.

"You've been keeping company with Radicals, Miss Weston. I wonder if the Christian young men and the other things would back your opinion."

"Of course they wouldn't. The human mind, especially if it's Arcadian, revolts against improvement and instruction. But facts speak truth, even if men lie."

"Facts are many-sided," said Colclough. "They don't strike us equally. If Geoffrey has the manners to ask me down, I shall consider the facts myself, and see if we *agree.*"

"We probably shall not—all the same, facts are stubborn."

"Depends on the mind that observes them. With you they would be, no doubt. I have, I assure you, at times found them exceedingly flaccid."

"That was when you wanted beef-tea and wouldn't take it, and were, in consequence, incapable of grasping the facts. Facts themselves are all right, it's the minds that are not."

"I wonder, if you were to give Radicals a sufficient quantity of beef-tea, would it increase their capacity for the refinements of truth?" said Hyde.

"I think it might if you were judicious in your choice of distributers. I think I should like to be one of the instruments chosen. When you are Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition, will you nominate me?"

"Certainly, I'll make you our first whip."

"Talking of truth, Miss Weston, which variety of truth do you prefer," said Colclough, "crude or mellow?"

"Mellow, certainly, crude being so much better for me. Why is it that what's best for you always tries your constitution, like the draughts that were to make us worse before we were better, as the nurse invariably assured us?"

"Frank's sermons have that effect. Their first tendency is to make one swear——"

"And their last?" asked Rica laughing.

"Possibly to make one think—that, however, depends on beef-tea and the mind. Some minds, to judge by the faces last Sunday, would be driven to pray—for the preacher. However, on the whole, the result's wholesome enough. The first and last influence of most sermons is to make one swear."

"Swearing is a nice cheerful way of throwing it off the mind. There's nothing left for women under these circumstances but to wish they were dead."

"Or that the preacher was."

"That's murder, and it's rather degrading and retrograde to get into the Ten Commandments so late on in the century."

Hyde turned to his wife in his friendly way.

"When the time comes, will you canvass for me?" he asked. "If Sturt retires now, it will be directly."

"Oh yes, I shall canvass for you. Perhaps when the time really comes you will have got some opinions."

She looked at him as if she wanted to say something more, and her lips moved, but she changed her mind. At the same moment she caught Rica's eyes fixed on her thinning hands, and she hid them in her lap.

"Possibly, or will have convinced you of the advantages of having none," said Hyde.

She wondered if they would ever cease talking; if she would ever get away into silence again. Involuntarily she let her hand hover for an instant near her side; she withdrew it hastily, but Colclough saw her, and it struck him it was time they went.

"Geoffrey and I are going horse-dealing this afternoon, Mrs. Hyde," he said. "Will you let us off now, or we may miss our man? You've got to see the other fellow first, Geoffrey. Meanwhile, if Miss Weston will allow me, I'll see her home, and catch you up at the club."

He had no notion of leaving Rica behind; he was determined the poor white thing should get rid of them altogether. Even the best women are sometimes dense as to what's good for their own kind.

"It's cold" said Colclough, when they got outside, "but it's nothing to the atmosphere of that house. What's wrong with that poor woman?"

"I only found out to-day, she's in love with her own husband, and she's simply dying of his mere friendliness, and I think she's ill as well."

"Mind diseased, most likely. It's as thinning as ague."

"I hope that's all."

"Hope, do you? Why, I thought that smallpox was a fool to mind, with women of that order and that make."

"But when the two, diseased body and mind, come together,it surely makes matters considerably worse?"

"*Humph!* And so he runs his estates properly, and I

hear lives a sane enough life, and is friendly, as you call it, with his wife. Things might be worse. All the same, he's not the fellow he was. He had the makings of a lot in him."

"If he had," said Rica sharply, "it will come out. Margaret Dering, if that's what you mean, never quenched any of his 'makings,' whatever they may have been. You would alter your tone if you had ever once seen her."

"Hullo! Aren't those unfeminine sentiments? If they are, even if in the main they're all right, I make it a rule myself never to go with them. It's best to keep with nature. Another thing, if you do happen to agree with a woman when she goes contrary to her sex, she'll generally round on you in the end."

"I imagine your acquaintances among women must be rather appallingly feminine?"

"They certainly are, as a rule. But in this present case, isn't it only the other woman who is to be considered now that the poor girl is dead?"

"Of course if you do the right thing; but you can't be always considering that, when you've known the other girl."

"Oh, when women go to the length of idealising one of themselves, reason's out of it."

"It seems to me far more utterly unreasonable for one of us to idealise one of you; the results are so glaringly contrary to nature; only of course if we didn't women's devotion would be at an end, and the world would fall to pieces. Man, unadorned and plain, without woman's imagination to supplement him, would hardly retain his place in nature."

"Miss Weston, beware of flippancy! It's the pitfall of the modern young of both sexes. And now I suppose I shall have to say good-bye, as that horse must be bought this afternoon."

"Yes—and besides, I was getting ever so much the better of you. Good-bye!"

As soon as they had gone, Beatrice went to her room, threw off her dress, and huddled down into a deep chair. She could grasp nothing quite clearly but extreme physical

discomfort, and a vague memory of something she had heard that morning. She was cold to the bone, and her heart ached miserably. When she grew warm at last, and the pain subsided, she sat up, gathered her shawl around her, and crept closer to the fire. But she was restless, and some fascination drew her to the glass. She let her shawl fall off, and looked at her fast thinning arms, at the slender bones visible in her neck, which only a few months ago had been so absolutely perfect. She sat down trembling, and rested her face on the table. She lifted it up directly and looked again at herself, wondering how it was that she never could look just as she felt; and as she watched herself, still wondering, her mouth softened, her cheeks flushed, little dimples dotted them, her eyes lighted up. They almost danced in the joy of their own newness, and the tenderness in them was an altogether lovely thing. She was so young—so delicious, so astonishingly pretty, that after one long look of surprise at herself she burst out crying.

"Oh, if he could only see me now!" she said, "only just this once—this one little once!" She threw out her arms yearningly into space, still wondering at herself. "If he only could see me," she cried softly, "I think he would know just how my heart feels!"

A sudden little cry of bitter pain tore through her lips; it hurt her so that she put up her handkerchief to see if any blood came, but she recognised her foolishness in a minute and laughed; then she struggled tiredly back to her chair.

"I had the cards in my hands," she thought, crouching nearer the fire, "and I played my game of life badly, and lost. He was ripe and ready for love, if some one had shown him the way—given him the lead." She laughed a tired little laugh. "*She* came, and had no difficulty; and now she is dead, and hope is dead, and I have just to stand about —till I die. O God! if only I can stand. I feel sometimes as if I must drop meanly out of the ranks, and die in a hole, like any sick beast. I would do so gladly, and escape the pain and the horror of his cousinliness, but it's so mean to *shirk fate;* and I do not intend, whatever happens, to be-

come an invalid,—an irritating, hampering bore,—to make my husband desire my death. I shall just stand as long as I am able to; and after—well, after—must take care of itself!"

She lay back and rested for a long time; then suddenly she leaned forward and thrust her hands out before her graspingly.

"But if he knew—knew the uninevitableness of it——" She dropped her face in her hands to hide a burning vision. "Oh, Geoffrey! my own, my dear——" She slowly lifted her face from her hands and looked at the fire, and the hopelessness slid back into her eyes.

"No," she slowly resolved; "what my love and myself couldn't win, I couldn't take for pity's sake. When I can't stand any longer—his knowing won't matter. I must have several things done—my gowns padded, and that sort of thing, and Louise can have excellent practice on my face. She will be invaluable to her future mistress. What a fortunate thing it is that gaiety is not demanded of me—impassiveness is an admirable *rôle*, after all. If I had to be brilliant, I would surely make a fool of myself, and annoy Geoffrey. And now a dinner and three different houses to go to—then bed—a good many hours' standing! How unlucky it should be so early in the season! And then the canvassing? I wonder how I shall get on? Oh, Louise, I shall wear that violet velvet, rather high in the neck, and it wants altering. Do see to it while I have my tea. I shall dress early and lie down. My head aches."

CHAPTER XIX.

MEANWHILE, in his small lodgings in Derbyshire, the curate Bridges was waiting till death should "deliver him." He had been failing for months, working feverishly, and now and again taking little sudden trips to London, the object of which mystified his Rector a good deal. From these he would return sad and heavy-eyed, to plunge more vehemently than ever into his work.

He was constantly tormented by a cough, which, if one were to judge of the man only by the size of him, must have torn him to shreds long ago. But the soul has sometimes better staying powers than its frail tenement. One day, however, he went to bed, never to leave it again, except to be carried to the sofa.

The Rector was in despair. It was only when he had lost the work of the staunch heart and the willing feet of his ridiculous little curate that he at all realised the extent of the loss that had befallen him. The first thing he did was to write to Rica; it seemed the natural and proper thing to do in the circumstances, although he expected nothing very definite to come of his news.

But some definite thing did come this time, and very quickly too—nothing less indeed than Rica herself. A miserable certainty of the poor little creature's loneliness had taken possession of her, and produced in her so abiding a sensation of extreme discomfort that in sheer self-defence she had to come, although everything in the whole wide world seemed to be going on just at the time.

Directly she arrived she installed herself as Bridges' *head nurse*, and when she had sat down calmly before him,

and insisted on his then and there looking her in the face and once and for all giving up his habit of being afraid of her, they got on admirably.

"Mr. Bridges," she said one day—she had just been out for a little walk, and on coming softly into the room she had seen him from the doorway lifting himself with both hands from the sofa and looking out at the distant hills with eyes full of sorrow and subdued longing—"there you are again doing precisely what I don't want you to do. Can't you let yourself rest, and stop that wretched, uncanny, and most unnecessary thinking? Now aren't you more comfortable? Do you happen to have a hair shirt, by the way?"

"Dear, Miss Rica, no!"

"I thought you might, perhaps, you're so irritating. People who keep pricking themselves, whether with shirts or anything else, on account of their sins, always are irritating, and you have the air of a man who is repenting all the time as hard as ever he can. Now that is rude to me, for it makes me feel as if I too should be doing something of the same sort. Besides, as far as regards yourself, it's irrational, and wasted energy, and will make your bills for medicine simply awful. For I am absolutely convinced you never committed a sin worth mentioning in all your life."

He thought for a few minutes.

"No, Miss Rica, no, perhaps I didn't. You see, the sins that strong men sin never came, so to speak, within my sphere, which was a limited, insignificant one. I was a woman, without her nobility or her strength made perfect in weakness. My sins were passive ones, little trivial sins of omission, and still more trivial little vanities."

"You are morbid. I shall be forced to give you one of the very nastiest of all the draughts—though it isn't due yet for two hours. But the doctor told me to use my discretion, which, indeed, was a quite unnecessary injunction, for I invariably do."

"Miss Rica, don't give me the medicine just yet; let me

talk to you instead. I never before, except in the course of my parochial duty, have had a lady all to myself to talk to and to make of me a first consideration. Now and again, indeed, at odd moments, a young lady may have talked to me, but it has been only when she herself was waiting for another man, and if not waiting, then at least hoping. I have never before been to any girl more than a stop-gap. Will you not then permit me to make my little confessions?"

"You shall make as many as ever you like. But before you begin, my discretion insists on your taking this brandy. It will benefit you in more ways than one—it will jog your inventive powers, and make the confessions more interesting."

He looked at her with a faint, half-puzzled smile.

"Miss Rica," he said, in a quaint trustful way that touched her strongly, "I could not, I think, make you quite understand the pain and the torture my insignificant body and that unpleasant squeak in my voice have always caused me. The smothered laugh of a schoolgirl has kept me quivering and hot for hours; and at Oxford among men it was, I think, a little worse. How trivial even to myself this now seems! but it has seemed very great,—perhaps no one but God knows quite how great! But it was only after I entered the Church that the knowledge of my insignificance, my inefficiency, physical and mental, really became a burthen to me, and I think kept me from God. We have grown so particular as regards our decorations. We bring our best in art and music into our churches; we would pause before we devoted to God's service an ugly vessel, or one with a flaw in it; and yet we seem to have no diffidence whatever in offering to Him our imperfect persons, our insignificant brains and stunted bodies. Let me go on, please," he pleaded.

He looked so white and full of pain that Rica was terrified, and wanted to stop him.

"Let me go on; there is so little time, and, as you know, *dear Miss Rica*, I am long-winded. Awkwardness, shyness,

above all anything ludicrous in a man," he continued, in a small, quavering, preachy voice—"an unfortunate squeak, for instance, is a dreadful thing in a priest of God. Any one of such defects will help to undermine his influence with women, more perhaps than a positive fault of character; and in their hands, as we all well know, rests the great proportion of the world's religion." ("Or churchiness," murmured Rica.) "And women, Miss Rica," he said hesitating, "are not always pitiful."

He paused, and a small, mixed smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"Go on," she said, with a little laugh; "don't apologise."

"Or, if his influence is not undermined, it is perhaps turned into undesirable channels. Insignificant men, dear Miss Rica, have unsatisfied cravings that strong men know nothing about. Sympathy, that form of sympathy which only a woman can give, is everything to poor, vain, fearful natures; but it is the birthright of the big and strong; the weak pick up but shreds and tatters of the beautiful thing. They who need it so sorely rarely or ever obtain it in its highest form. They are sometimes led to seek something akin to it in less natural sources. Some, we are told, seek their natural affinities—old maids—sad, subdued, unsatisfied ones, who have also lost in life's battle. This temptation, I need not tell you, did not befall me, Miss Rica, the circumstances not being propitious," he added, with a low, flickering laugh. "Others again fall into misconceptions, and think that their heart's desire is for them, not for the strong and the beautiful. You must often have thought my presumption with regard to Miss Dering ridiculous, Miss Rica; now it seems madness. But then, ah, then!"

He broke off to rest a little. Rica said nothing; the silence seemed best for him. He began after a pause, in a strained voice, which increased the poor squeak.

"There is one of Robert Browning's poems that I understand, and the only one. It is called 'Misconceptions.' Have you ever read it, Miss Rica?"

"I have often, and I never thought you either presump-

tuous or ridiculous. You wouldn't have been a man if you hadn't loved her."

This view of the case soothed him, as Rica meant it should. He brightened visibly.

"Ah well, it's over now, and past. Miss Rica, you look upon her as dead, do you not?"

"Of course I do. What do you mean?"

"Because I think it very doubtful. Her aunts had indeed a letter saying that she was dying, that there was absolutely no hope. But there was no address given. The two poor ladies went up to London, and searched for her with breaking hearts, but without result. Then they returned, and were, it seems, vouchsafed a dream from the Lord assuring them of her death. Taking that, and the letter received as conclusive, they decided that she was dead, and announced the fact, firmly believing it, and giving no details. You know how little is really known about them; no one dreamed of asking for details. But one day Miss Julia told me all about it; she had herself no doubts at all, and I of course kept mine to myself. But I always meant that before I went you should know. I have told no one else. Miss Rica, do you know that these women carry broken hearts in their poor tired bodies?"

He somehow expected her to be touched, and to say so, and paused to hear her.

"Oh, the old wretches!" she said; "they richly deserve them. Tell me more—all you know."

Her hardness of heart was a little disappointment, but he continued obediently—

"I myself went up whenever the Rector could spare me, and indeed, altogether through my own carelessness in forgetting to take an overcoat, I caught this final cold one wet night on the embankment. I thought with that little trout-stream in her heart she would most likely seek the river."

He broke off with a gurgling sound, and for some minutes Rica was breathless. But he recovered, and lay silent till the night came.

The next day he looked up in her face as she bent over him.

"It seems most strange to see you serving me in this beautiful way," he said,—"you, at sight of whom I once would have gladly exchanged places with any snail that had a shell."

"At sight of me!" she nearly screamed.

"Yes, your eyes were so critical, and so exceedingly alarming, and your dress was so very wonderful. You had a most complicated, puzzling, unexpected appearance. It seemed to me that sudden things must always come to pass when you were near, and I have always had a foolish fear of any sudden sensation. It is, I fancy, a constitutional defect."

"Good gracious! It's you who are sudden. What astonishing effects! One looks at oneself in a new light altogether. But go on. You wouldn't like to be a snail in a shell now to avoid me, would you?"

"No, dear Miss Rica, I should exceedingly regret it. Even if I could do so, I would not rob you of one jot of your most useful faculty of"—he paused—"looking through one. Your critical faculty, perhaps, would be the better term. It is a great gift; I have myself frequently suffered from the lack of it. It would, I am of opinion, if rightly directed, be most efficacious in grasping the fundamental causes of certain faults in the organisation of our Holy Church. The faculty of women for seeing truly, as it were, might help us. I used to think differently. I used to look upon our priestly arrangements as requiring no alteration, as being supremely good; and accessories were to me mighty things, as, indeed, now and then, your uncle has found to his cost. Everything seems so changed—things, mere things, have grown so trivial, and the whole so infinitely great, that it but accentuates the littlenesses that go to its making. I can see development in all things, and the good and the evil are coming into harmony. Did you give me opium in that draught, Miss Rica? Is my imagination expanded by drugs? or is this death?"

"You have had no opium," she said gently.

He began again after a few minutes, and she let him. It seemed the only thing to do.

"A constant feeling of inadequacy, Miss Rica, is a most unpleasant companion. All this strange stir in men's minds, this clatter of progress, this rush and stress, and, more than all, the mocking indifference of the many, have exceedingly perplexed me, and have emphasised my own incapacity. Knowledge and strength are terrible things to lack; ignorance is a hard task-master."

He gasped out the last words in painful jerks, and Rica was surprised at herself for letting him run down so badly. But she had been wondering at the effect of death on the poor little curate, with his halting speech and his timid reticence. Who would dare now to laugh at him? she had been thinking, as he struggled to give voice to the little vagrant thoughts that were crowding into his soul. She put him back among his pillows, and ordered him peremptorily not to speak for ten minutes.

Then she turned to the fire, and began to think of herself and her curious mixed feelings, hankering every free moment for her lost dances. With a nameless terror of death, yet waiting for it there all by herself; and watching with undisguised interest its stripping off of the little absurdities that had hidden a tiny heart of gold, which life had only chevied still farther back into its wrappings.

"He's not dying at all," she told herself, looking at him; "he is only making ready—gathering up his poor little strength for a spring into life; that fuller life of Presently."

When the ten minutes came to an end he began again.

"That inadequacy, you see, haunted me. How could I explain what was to me incomprehensible? How could I fathom depths to which my shred of rope could not reach? When, from time to time, stricken hearts have revealed themselves to me, I—ignorant, without strength, confused, and helpless—would only cry vaguely to God to help me. *Confessions that* only anguish could wring into expression

I met in dumb despair." He shivered. "No soul was ever robbed of its bitterness by help of mine. That God gave the help I never doubted; but I knew not of it. I have miserably failed."

"Lie down there properly, and listen to a little commonsense. You haven't failed; those things that were incomprehensible to you would very likely have also been incomprehensible to Pascal, or even to S. John. They wouldn't, therefore, to them, have been reprehensible, any more than they have been to you; they wouldn't have frantically abused what they didn't happen to understand, nor have you done so."

He looked at her open-eyed; he was indeed being considered in a new light, being thrust into very delightful company. "S. John! Pascal!" he gasped softly.

"Very pure unstained souls can receive what are to them truths like children; they filter in and are at once absorbed and assimilated; they haven't to struggle through a whole jungle of perplexities and opinions, mostly collected from your neighbours or books; they just go straight home, and are pondered on by pure eyes looking inward, that can see even if the light is dim. They become a state of mind; you can't explain a state of mind, or give it out in words. The words to explain some things aren't forged yet, they must come straight from Nature's anvil. There never, I'm quite convinced, came a soul to you but went away warmed and lightened of its load,—not from your words, but from your —well, your state of mind."

"You are very good to me. I wish I could think——"

"Look here, I'll tell you something. You remember young Hull and his atrocious mother, and the whole hideous muddle. Well, he went to you one evening and told you things. You didn't say much; you stammered and got red like a girl, and the tears came into your eyes; and then you knelt down and you prayed like a little child speaking to its mother. These were the very words he said one day before he died. You know my uncle asked me to go and see him in London."

"I thought I had fallen very far short of my duty, and allowed that poor soul to sink."

"I don't know anything much about such things, but I don't think that soul sank, and I know quite well it never forgot you. I was going out a lot at that time, and only just wrote a scrap of a note to my uncle. I really meant to write to you, but—well, I forgot. It was beastly selfish of me."

"Dear Miss Rica, no!"

"It's gospel truth; don't let your Christianity lead you astray. It's better to be truthful than Christian, isn't it? And now go to sleep, or at any rate be quiet. And be quite convinced that on the whole you have made a very complete day's work of your life. Don't let your conscience make away with your reason."

CHAPTER XX.

THE next day was bleak and harsh. Sudden gusts of tempest broke out fitfully; flying hailstones fell with swift sharp strokes, stinging the flesh wherever they smote it. It was a vicious, restless day, with no peace in it.

Rica shivered as she stood by the window and watched her uncle crossing the green. He walked with bent head and bowed shoulders. He looked "full of the evening and sad," and it was so altogether unlike him that it depressed her. It was neither age nor weariness, however, that touched the man; it was reality. Soil was being turned up in his heart that had long lain fallow, and the fresh sensitive young earth was shrinking and trembling, exposed cold and naked to bitter blasts and scorching suns, and was longing with all its might to get back again into its own warm depths of peace.

The life of his little curate had visibly increased the pleasant peace of the Rector, his consoling sense of serene self-satisfaction; in the same way the approaching death of this little man was visibly decreasing these things.

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Weston's stirrings-up produced any permanent change in him. An impression, an upward fillip, rarely does. These things come and go and are forgotten.

Mr. Weston cheered up quite soon, and continued on his pleasant course of growing stout.

"Miss Rica, come near the fire," said Bridges presently. "I do trust the bad night I gave you hasn't made you tired. I feel wretchedly selfish in not insisting on a night nurse now one has become necessary; but I should so miss you. I did not contemplate being so long," he added apologetically."

"I'm not an atom tired," said Rica, coming from the window; "and if a night nurse appeared on the premises she should as speedily disappear. Now we're both comfortable, you may talk."

"I have been wanting to. I have been wondering what you must have thought of my remaining in the Church after I had found myself out. It seems no doubt a paradox, and I want to put myself right before you on that point."

"But you don't want any putting right. Your conscience is like the liver of a Strasbourg goose,—it will crowd you out altogether if you don't curtail it."

She turned and laughed outright as she looked at him. She was so glad to think of the great awakening that was going to break on this poor tired little soul.

He wondered why she laughed but he knew she meant him well, and he paused in his grateful way to think what blessed things women were.

"It is some months since I first began to doubt my fitness for my calling. The thought was more bitter than death; indeed, if this be death, it was a thousand times more bitter. I fought against it. I prayed and wrestled day after day with God. I did my work as one in a dream. I refused to see that my labours were abortive, my strivings in vain. I knew there was a flaw, but I chose to believe that it lay in the hardness of heart of those to whom I ministered, not in my lack of strength, and power, and beauty. The choicest food loses half its savour when served on an unsightly plate, and so it seems to me it is with spiritual matters. I was a weak vessel, with no compensating talent. An ill-made, clumsy instrument, unfit to dispense God's food."

He struggled hard against his cough, but it was too much for him, and now a fit seized him and shook out the best part of his remnant of life. But directly he was able he began again.

"Let me make the most of my time," he pleaded; "let me speak in my lame way till silence comes. I have always been very gregariously inclined, and never till now have I been able to gratify my inclination."

"You shall just do as you like," she said; and when she had put his pillows straight, she stooped down and kissed him in her nice, pleasant way. "He might like it," she reflected, "just to know what it's like before he dies," and when she saw the extraordinary startled delight of his face, she felt that it was a really well-spent kiss.

"When I had finally grasped the ugly fact, and reduced myself to reason," he continued, "with much flinching, but, I trust, honestly, I determined to give place to a better man. I had an uncle, a stockbroker, who promised to obtain for me a clerk's place, and in my evenings I thought of seeking some more congenial work. Before coming to this conclusion, I had considered the advisability of becoming a missionary, till I made some careful investigations which led me to believe that the lower races are even more susceptible to outward influences than we ourselves are, and that there are already quite enough missionaries, meagre in mind and body, to draw down on themselves the derision of coloured peoples, and that still more stinging derision of the press. I read some accounts of missionaries during that period, not to be found in the religious journals, and they surprised me —surprised me very much indeed. I determined not to swell the ranks of these unhappy detrimentals. It was an unpleasant period of my life. The Church's work was very dear to me, it seemed to have absorbed my soul within it. But I found courage at last. The letters to my Bishop and my dear Rector are in my desk; this last cold made me neglect to post them. Will you destroy them, Miss Rica? This came instead, blessed be God!" he murmured softly to himself.

A few hours later, just as the twilight was quenching the red in the sky, Rica was sitting watching him. She was very tired; she had had no sleep to speak of now for three nights. She had just been chafing his hands with a sort of hopeless tenderness, for she could bring no warmth into them; and at last she fell asleep, with one of them held in hers.

When she awoke, the red in the sky had all been put out; his hand was still in hers, and his face turned towards her smiling; but he was elsewhere.

CHAPTER XXI.

"I WISH this room looked anywhere but into the street, with one of its windows even," said Rica Weston, coming away from an unsatisfactory inspection of the dull rows of small shops opposite Frank's room. "I did my best with those window-boxes, yet they hide nothing, but just look conceited and upstarty perched aloft, crowing over the surrounding sordidness. Doesn't it get into you, Frank, this sordidness—into your bones and marrow, and all your other things? This room is pretty, and bright, and chintzy,—in a word, it murmurs of me; and yet it's thick with this horrid suburbiness, and extremely depressing."

Frank looked up from the sermon he had got stuck in, according to an unfortunate habit he had, unless indeed it happened to be a few plain words that had swollen up in his mind and grown too big for comfort. At such times a congregation, which simply had to sit still and listen, or pretend to listen, to anything he might choose to say, was a thing to be thankful for.

"Just now," said Frank, "you are yourself the most depressing object in the room. You ate an excellent luncheon, so it's not measles or croup, anyway."

"Frank, pull down the blind; I can stand that Italian oil-shop no longer."

"I fear you require some sort of professional consolation. I'll get in the new curate, unless you look out. Curious that one can't manage that sort of thing with one's own sister."

"You may try if you want practice."

"*But* I don't. I'm no end of a swell in this department

of the profession with the young persons about here. I get regular consignments of them to deal with."

"Oh, do you deal with them?"

"Don't I? Ask them. I amaze even the Vicar. It's somehow got known among the genteeler portion of the flock that I'm in some remote way connected with the West End, and that my 'aunty' married a lord,—one old lady asked me if she didn't,—and that the other young fellow, who looks after 'quite the scum' in that poverty-stricken iron church, could go no higher than a colonial bishop; and yet the airs and graces he gave himself were enough to sicken you. So, in consideration of my aunty, I can put what force I like into my remarks to the young things. I know two who shudder at the sight of me. They were, I fancy, prepared for quite another outcome to the priestly consolations."

"Frank, will you shut that window? I smell the oil and the Italians."

Frank came over and peered down at her through his glasses with some curiosity.

"That little chap did his dying very creditably to himself and all concerned," he said, "and in a way one would never have expected of him; but don't let the fact make you permanently mawkish. Can't you turn on some new tap? Try a district."

"Are you insane, dear?"

"Jack Arnold's a good fellow; why don't you try him?"

Rica was sitting in a low, soft, frilled chair, with her hands behind her back, looking rather cross.

"It's you who are mawkish, not me. Jack Arnold, poor dear, he has high aims, and babbles of them at dances, and I fancy he improves his mind. You surely don't think I have sunk as low as that?"

"A woman's life is never complete without husband and children. The Vicar told us so yesterday when we were all behaving so prettily round the table and wishing we could smoke. Being in a mawkish state, I thought the sentiment might suit you."

"It would suit that sermon better perhaps. Hold out to one of the shuddering young things the comfortable hope of annexing a 'lordly aunty.' I can imagine a woman's growing very deadly sick of husbands and children taken neat, and as a constancy, but they would be convenient at times—when one feels murderous. I feel this minute as if a yawning chasm had sprung up—or, shouldn't it be sprung down?—into my path."

"A mild, immature, yawning chasm, flaxen-haired, with deprecating manners and a lisp, and belongs to the unnatural order—step-mother?"

"Oh, no doubt it's paltry to care. I suppose my father had a right to marry her if he wanted to. Curious any one should, isn't it? It isn't either because she's *she;* but you know quite well that I've always mistrusted those small white women with dimples, who move so softly that they're on you before you know what you're about. She's an irritating person, but she's an excellent and creditable head of a house. I am not wanted there any more. What business on earth had you all to grow up at such a rate? There's positively nothing left to do but to amuse myself. And at my age, after two full-pitched seasons, that sort of thing gets flat."

Frank again inspected her.

"It's evident you want toning up. We can't unfortunately provide you with a succession of curates' deaths; besides, though instructive, they rack the constitution and enervate the mind."

"That's not in the least funny, and its abominably unfair to think that even for that he should be laughed at. That's hitting a man when he's down with a vengeance. Then to stand brazenly up in the pulpit and teach that 'charity thinketh no evil'! You couldn't die as well to save your life, my good boy."

Frank grinned. "No, my good girl, and neither could you. We've come of too stout a stock. It needs a touch of constitutional sickliness to die effectively. If a life has a *strong grasp on its* soul, it won't let it go without a struggle,

and the struggle is often ugly and often brutal. You see at that time our intellectual bonds have become slackened, and our restraints are all at loose ends."

"Frank, don't be ghastly! I don't care what you say, a girl with a step-mother, and with no marked taste for marrying her neighbour, and without a ghost of a mission about her, or any desire whatever to land herself aloft on a pedestal, is at a disadvantage in these times."

The unexpected arrival of a step-mother was an ugly shock for Rica. And then her uncertainty about Margaret's fate also worried her a good deal, and yet she had so little to go on that she had not even said anything to Frank about it. She had called at the Yews directly after Bridges' death, and had simply insisted on seeing the two ladies, and had further insisted on their showing her the letter. When she had read it, she quite understood what altogether puzzled them,—the fact of no other letters following it.

She knew perfectly well that the loving, simple-minded creature who had written the letter, with its quaint, odd pathos, would take no further notice of two aunts so misdirected as not to have rushed up at once to see the girl, living or dead.

It was, therefore, just as likely that Margaret had not died, as that she had, especially as in the letter Mrs. Bent had said that Margaret had left the balance of all the money in her own control in her hands, to use as she thought best.

The Miss Derings, it seemed, were the sole guardians of the girl, and for some reason, best known to themselves, they had resolved not to inform the lawyers connected with her property either of Margaret's going away or of her death until the time of her majority should come. Rica was certain that Miss Katherine had already become possessed and haunted of a horrid doubt. The restless look in her eyes was something to shiver at, and she knew that she went now and again up to London, a thing the village had never before known her to do.

Frank crumpled up his nose in a fashion he had when he was altogether in earnest, and again looked at his sister.

"I wonder," he said, "if you have any sense worth mentioning?"

"If I——"

"Or how you stand with regard to the proprieties?"

"Be good enough to look on me as a human woman, and not as a congregation. What are you trying to say?"

He gave her another curious inspection.

"Well, don't glare," she said; "go on."

"If you don't get something to keep you quiet, it's very apparent you'll get into mischief,—probably marry Arnold and find an unvarying diet of a prig's improved mind unsatisfying. Better keep him as a final resource. Perhaps I may be wanting you myself."

"Yes—that sounds good—go on."

"This parish is a night-mareish place, you see. It's simply overrun with girls—some gone to the devil, and scores more on the road; and living in the midst of them, they get on one's nerves. Something or other ought to be done for them,—something effectual, I mean. There's any amount being done, but it's mostly failure, and nearly all done in livery. They don't like livery, you see——"

"You take good care they don't see much of yours, under ulsters and other subterfuges."

"So would you if you knew all. They see too much."

"But aren't there lay committees and things?"

"I suppose your mind is wandering in the direction of vigilance committees. Oh, they abound, bless you. I was at one the other day. Never, as long as I live, will I forget the unpleasantness of the proceedings, and the rows and rows of women, some of them shockingly badly dressed, listening with bated breath to anecdotes and records that, to say the least, were amazing, and mostly outside the point. From vigilance ladies, good Lord, deliver us! You should have seen them after the meeting (it was a drawing-room one), scurrying to the tea-table, and drinking up the cream. My dear, they didn't leave me a drop."

"And so you pitch them into the Litany, poor creatures!"

"Oh, we've got vigilance ladies, and district ladies, and sisters, and all manner of well-meaning persons; and yet the paucity of the result of work among young girls is appalling. And, you see, we've handicapped ourselves. The man-and-brother business doesn't pay. I think, somehow, we want some absolutely unprofessional help. It's those quite young girls that bother me. Of course, the other hardened creatures are impossible; we won't think of them at all in this category. But I have a sort of theory about the quite young ones. You see, most of the benevolent, staid persons and the liveried ladies being failures, I thought perhaps girls might succeed a little. The foolish sometimes do where the wise fail."

"You're a little paradoxical, but go on."

"I thought of the British matron with her motherhood at her back, but she's too cock-sure of herself and her salvation, and her perfect understanding of all the ins and outs of girls,—she'd never do. And so it struck me that you, and your like, might step into the breach and flesh your maiden swords."

"You have shaped out a fine career for me and my like. One would need to be an angel or a mission, or that sort of person, to——"

"But that's just what you wouldn't want to be. A nice well-dressed girl with her faults and her foolishness would be a much more likely straw for one of those poor things to cling on to than either an angel or a mission. The mere occasional contact with a girl to whom brightness, and change, and joy come as a matter of course, would of itself bring such a novel stir into the sordid, warping life of a girl of this type that it would have a wholesome influence, and satisfy even a mere fraction of her gregarious instinct. Girls all dragging out life under equally dreary conditions can't find ideas enough to make conversation, and so they resort to facts, which in this neighbourhood is a fatal thing. They get tired of themselves and of each other, and of their homes. They want to seize the colour and light and brightness natural to their age, by fair means or foul. And they do it.

I was wondering if girls couldn't distribute themselves better —make of themselves little colour notes, so to speak, in a dreadful drab world, bringing into it with them their sound every-day natures."

"I don't think my sound every-day nature would be a very agreeable article to introduce into any household just at present, drab or otherwise," and she added with a shrug, "I don't feel equal to judging any creature living in the general unpleasantness of this hideous neighbourhood for any mortal thing she may do or say, when I can feel as virulent as I do for no mortal cause. I fancy the drab girls would want rather more than occasional contact with us, the brilliant-plumaged, to do themselves much good. We're poor creatures often, and I fancy somehow it is just because we're altogether too humble—we don't appreciate ourselves with sufficient keenness. Violet-in-the-shade business. I wonder, would a nearer acquaintance with the drab persons show us to ourselves in any fresh lights. I fancy it is fresh lights to see ourselves by we want, not the shade that befits violets. The cloth is just off the table, dear Frank, the sermon is on the floor, and the ink's nearly after it. Do you know," she went on at full speed, "that I'm going to tea at Mrs. Duff's this afternoon, and that I had a letter to-day from Mrs. Hyde? Her husband's election is to come on soon, and she wants me to help canvass. The unhappy part of it is that Mr. Hyde hasn't one definite opinion."

"He has plenty of indefinite ones, no doubt, only needing consolidation."

"I heard him with my own mouth say he was a transition."

"What else are any of us, unless we're throwing-backs?"

"That too is a flabby, indefinite thing. I must have something with a more solid name to canvass with."

"Is Jim going to canvass?"

"I don't know—he asked himself down. Frank, why did he chuck India? I thought people never came home from there to stay permanently till they were forty or fifty, *and quite liver*less."

"It was India that chucked him, you see. He had a good appointment, but it was in a bad part, and it's next to done for him, poor chap. Good thing for him he could come home. He came in for a lot of money just lately, so it don't matter."

"I'm glad I shall have to canvass, even without a name to do it with. I'm just ready for any sort of a war-path. And later on, I shall consider the drab girl, you know, and tell you the results of my reflections upon her."

"No hurry, I only threw out a feeler."

"You did, did you? It was a fine stiff feeler, with sharp points to it that, combined with the Italian warehouse, will make me uncomfortable for the rest of the day. Unhappy curate! You don't mean to say that you have to fill in all those sheets? Good heavens, how fearfully demoralising! How many whiskies-and-sodas do you take in the process? And do you ever consider that the congregation can't take so much as one—and aren't you sorry? And —— Frank, it's my best hat! Throw a cushion if you must shy something."

Frank felt a little low as he sat down again to his sermon. He hoped to goodness that Jim had nothing to do with Rica's gusty condition, he was far too sick a man for that sort of thing; and sermon-writing was a grind when one never could say a word one wanted to,—conventions dogged one's steps everywhere. As he fitted a new nib into his pen, he wondered if they would stop short, even of heaven.

CHAPTER XXII.

COLCLOUGH spent a good deal of his odd time with Frank Weston. It interested him to watch the keenness of the fellow, his honest downright wish to do his best for his people —his blunders even were amusing to observe. But what Colclough liked best of all was Frank's pleasant way of making the very best of what he himself knew to be irredeemably bad tools. A man shows so much more strength in doing the best possible with inefficient tools, than in kicking over the traces, and setting forth glibly to forge new crude ones from his own inexperience.

Jim, Frank, his dog, and his kitten were sitting together in Frank's room one Sunday evening. They were all good enough friends to ignore each other's existence when the humour took them, and for quite half an hour neither of the men had spoken a word.

Colclough looked less battered than he had done for some time, Frank rather more so. Keenness of life must tell on any man, however cool he keeps himself.

"For the last few weeks," he began suddenly, "a girl has been attending my week-night services that you damn with such an unnecessary amount of platitudes, who puzzles me altogether. I can't place her among the crowd. I have often tried to catch her and to examine her close, but by the time I have shed my surplice she is off. I wish you could get a look at her. Indeed, I wish you could somehow manage to talk to her."

"How in Heaven's name am I to spot her? There are dozens, aren't there?"

"*Not an atom* like this one. You'd spot her in a jiffy.

There's always a big stout girl of the mastiff species, with a touch of the bull-dog, I fancy, at her heels. She glares open-mouthed at the other girl all through the service, and imitates every movement she makes. She has an extraordinary voice,—something absorbing in it."

"What! the mastiff-cum-bull-dog?"

"The other one. There's some quite unusual quality in her voice which I never heard before. It strikes those girls, too; they turn and listen to her when she begins to sing. I've seen some of the young ones start and look at her, terrified out of their wits. The queer thing is, she never draws tears or that sort of thing, even from these hysterical creatures. There's something in her voice that's too alive and wholesome for that."

"He seems to know a fair amount about her voice," Colclough thought.

"What sort of a looking person is she?" he asked.

"Don't know. I tell you I never saw her close. She walks well. Do you remember how those Beaucaire women used to walk? Well, it's very much the same style." He looked at his watch and stood up.

"Beyond a joke!" thought Colclough. "I wonder what's the next move on the board?"

"Here, Jill! You stay and look after the fire," said Frank. "She has a liking for the calves of vergers and other Church dignitaries, and she'll sneak after me if she can. Here, let me help you! How, in the name of goodness, can you carry an ulster and two comforters?"

"To cover my bones, man. One layer of flesh is worth a dozen ulsters. What do you know of cold?"

"I hope this night's work won't hurt you?"

"Precisely what I was hoping about yourself."

Frank said nothing, but strode on down the street.

"There's a lot in rude health, I tell you, Frank. You're a sound, wholesome receptacle, as you now stand, to shoot rubbish into. You suit the neighbourhood. If you get sentimental, or lose condition, you'll be a dead failure. Measly looks or weak knees, or any infirmity of the like

order, are bad stumbling-blocks in the Church. Hullo! he's disappeared. I always thought his aggressive nose and his amazing circulation would have saved him: I'm mistaken, it seems."

Frank came back directly.

"As we turned that corner, I saw the girl disappearing into a house where one of the 'flock' lives—a wild-eyed creature, whom I defy any one in heaven or on earth to tame. Look here," he went on after a minute: "this business is a nuisance. Upon my word, I keep hurrying up the prayers to get to the singing—wholesome, isn't it? I find myself preaching at her: do you hear, man? And the folly of it is that it's merely her voice."

"Since when have you become so musical?"

"Since I heard the girl singing, if you must know. It will have to be put a definite stop to, or else I must fly the place. I found myself to-day serving out scraps of stock-in-trade piety to two sick fellows,—not so sick, however, but that they could think. I felt one grinning at me all down the stairs."

"Perhaps you'd better see her; she may disillusion you and restore your sanity. I hope I may spot her. The next move will be to effect an introduction—not difficult hereabouts, I should imagine. Let me see: sings like an angel, walks like a woman of Beaucaire, has the mastiff-cum-bull-dog at heels, her——"

"Oh, shut up, Jim!"

"Well, while you shed your draperies I shall stalk her. Come, isn't that fair? By the way, Frank, suppose you let the young woman sing on, and go down to your father's. You'll get a few days' hunting, won't you?—it won't be over for a week; and come back in your normal condition. It's possible as things stand."

"But it is not, unfortunately. I intend to find out who the girl is and how she got her voice."

He poked his head forward in his near-sighted way, wrinkling up the skin on his aggressive nose.

Colclough knew the gesture.

"The deuce it isn't. There, come, and run your head into a noose, if you're fool enough to persist in it, and God help you. At the same time, I have never noticed that He ever does help a man who deliberately makes an ass of himself."

"Will you come into the vestry?"

"No; what should I want in the vestry?"

"Reserve your bad manners for you native heath, Jim. We have to be particular in these parts. The verger, I perceive, imagines we're having a free fight, and has the police already in his mind."

CHAPTER XXIII.

COLCLOUGH'S rejection of the hospitality of his vestry in no wise troubled Frank. He was very glad to be alone for a few minutes. He sincerely wanted to get himself into a fitting state of goodwill, fairness, and clear-sighted sanity to do his evening's work well. He knew that to bring about this state of mind would require an effort, and that he should need a little time before he could give the attempt anything at all of a fair show.

He had instituted these midnight services some months before, and he ran them almost unaided. The Vicar stood aside and prayed for their speedy downfall, Frank said; and the other curates had their hands too full to help much.

Besides increasing his work considerably, and reducing sermon-making to an abiding terror, his conception was an audacious and ticklish undertaking for the young. "Boys attempting the work of seers and prophets," Colclough called it. These services were not the first set going in London by any means, but they were, perhaps, the most vigorously conducted of any, and had more daring humanity about their organisation. Every possible accessory that could attract was resorted to, and the evangelical journals mentioned the proceedings with wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It was a horrible neighbourhood, and badly found in parsons, and the few who scoured its neighbourhood night and day had an anxious, wearing time of it, with great outlay and small return, considered any way,—morally, physically, or spiritually.

Even a year of such work might well suck every atom

of enthusiasm for God or man from the strongest; and yet, although these poor parsons lose flesh and strength and youth largely, and leave behind them hourly the delightful happy insolence, the restful, charming ways of speech and conduct, they bring with them from the Universities, and grow hungry-looking, with restless eyes and mouths that twitch easily—yet they still struggle upward and on in a most amazing way.

Even at thirty-five, there are to be found enthusiasts among these men, but by that time the froth of their enthusiasm has a tinge of blood in it. At forty, there is more blood than froth.

Of the five men who undertook the cure of the souls of the odd thousands in this district, Frank was the only one who still made mild jokes and enjoyed his life properly. He had a private income and a sufficient amount of brute strength. Then he had no wife and young children fading for the light, no big-brained boys, who made their father's heart ache every time he looked at them, to think that he must deny them things that had come to him as his daily bread.

Even the certain knowledge that three parts of his work was absolutely resultless had not yet damped Frank's ardour.

His little pause was well spent.

By the time he had begun "Dearly beloved," he was in as sensible and impersonal a frame of mind as any honest parson need wish to be.

The service was half way through when a girl came up the aisle. Colclough, from his corner, watched her with much interest, wondering if she could be the girl in whom Frank was interested. She walked undeniably well, certainly. After a further inspection, he sincerely hoped that she was not.

She was a tall, finely-developed woman, with noticeable eyes, as fierce and sombre as any forest beast's, but with neither a spark of eagerness nor any suspicion of restlessness in them. They were steady and assured. Her

mouth was beautiful, serene, and cruel. The only restless thing about her were her hands. Colclough watched one of them that happened to be ungloved with some interest. It was a dusky, swift, wicked, little hand, as deft as an Arab's. It could curb a horse or handle a dagger with equal ease. Her face too was dusky, except where brilliant red flushes darted up into her cheeks like flames, leaving them brown and cold when it flickered away. She looked extremely Eastern, and had seemingly but little to thank her ancestors for; such a medley of gloom and smouldering fires could only have sprung from a race that had ruled magnificently in blood and lust.

"An amazing deal of faith, hope, and charity will have to be used up before that young woman is brought to a proper sense of contrition," Colclough thought.

She paused as she reached a certain pew, and scanned the faces of its occupants with a fine quiet insolence, then turned leisurely and watched the fresh comers as they filed to their places. She was perfectly at ease, and not at all put out by the fact that her skirts nearly filled the narrow aisle, and got jostled unceremoniously by the girls who were making for seats near the chancel. She was known by them, but no favourite, to judge by the manner in which they looked at her.

"One would as soon expect a trace of embarrassment from her as from one of the Pyramids," Colclough reflected from his retirement. "It's a wild business altogether; I wish I was out of it, with that fellow disillusioned. What's come to the girl now?"

She had bent forward with a slow, slumberous sort of interest, her indifferent lips had parted with a half-pleased look, and she was watching some one who had come in. Colclough turned quickly to see a girl coming rapidly up the aisle, and he knew in a flash it was the girl he had come to see.

"That unfortunate Frank," he said to himself. "Like a woman of Beaucaire, indeed! I never saw the walk of one a patch on hers, and the turn of her neck is good. What

brings her here, I should like to know. She is somebody, that's very apparent, and it's an exceedingly complicated business."

She went into the pew where the other girl stood, who immediately followed her, and sat herself down in defiant comfort. Their pew was quite full, and Poll, who was close at Margaret's heels, found her place gone. She paused, and glared at the interloper, with fiery cheeks and lips well set for an oath. Colclough felt an explosion must be imminent, and wriggled nervously on his seat. But just in the nick of time Margaret looked round, grasped the situation, and pointed emphatically to a seat behind her. Poll yielded, still glaring, flounced into her seat, and flopped on her knees, bringing down in her descent a Bible and three prayer-books.

Colclough changed his seat to one higher up, and forgot for the minute to swear at Frank, or even to recommend him to God's help,—which, after all, with the average man is only another form of oath.

The distant voices of the choir's "Amen" arose, and the congregation stood or lolled, as seemed best to them. Margaret, of course, stood naturally and directly, the other followed her example lazily with a little shrug. Poll jerked forward, and was on her legs directly she saw her leader move.

Then the dusky girl, who held in her hands unopened a quaint, vellum-bound volume, that looked strikingly like a rare old missal, threw it down, and stepped a pace or two away from her companion, half turning so that her rich dress hung right out in the aisle, causing smirks, and nudges, and whispered comments to be bandied about among the congregation. Her part of the service, it seemed, was about to begin.

The organ rolled out, then the voices of the choir, and then Colclough's ears were astonished by such a voice as he had never before heard; it was so startlingly pure, and young, and strong, and yet there seemed to him to be in it countless years of life.

"That's what Frank meant, then, by his 'alive,' I suppose," he thought; "it's certainly that. And I'm exceedingly sorry for the fellow, I fear he's got himself into a bad fix."

Colclough turned to the congregation. There was not a man in it but himself and the Church officials, and not a woman over twenty-five. They were all awake now—a tribute to Frank's judicious selection of music, and its lasting influence upon girls of this order—grown more alert at the sound of the music. During the prayers they had whispered, and grinned, and produced a various assortment of noises with their tongues, and they had yawned and sighed copiously. But now they were bored no longer. Many of them, indeed, had found voices, half fearful, half amazed at the words they brought out. Most of them shouted in the worst music-hall style. One or two of the very young ones seemed to be seized with a spasm of rapture; they swayed violently to and fro; they clasped their hands and contorted their faces; great tears made havoc among paint and powder; and their voices rose now and again to shrill shrieks. One little thing went near dancing in her wild excitement. If any of them had received the smallest encouragement at that moment, they would then and there have flung themselves on their knees, and howled out, with no reservation whatever, the full sum of their iniquity.

This anti-climax was, however, taken heed of in the church, and carefully guarded against. At the end of each hymn the lights were lowered, and there was a long pause; the girls were given time to cool themselves and to gather their senses around them again. It was a little shock to Colclough to hear a few miserable shudders in the dim silence of the interval.

Meanwhile, the girl near Margaret was flushing and paling alternately; her impassiveness seemed to have vanished at the sound of the other's voice; her eyes were curiously dilated, and her little hands twisted and tortured themselves incessantly. She had, without any doubt, an *enormous* appreciation of music, and of the rarity of Mar-

garet's voice, but it was a gloomy mixture of unusual and unwelcome emotions that moved her—not enjoyment.

When the hymn had ceased she sat down. Colclough thought she was trembling a little, and he was certain she looked unpleasantly sullen and a little resentful. She took no further notice of posture, she sat on movelessly, oblivious of an audible sniff of scorn that Poll cast on her from behind. *She* knew her duty at least, if the other didn't.

"She's a most dreadful person from many points of view," Colclough thought, "but it's well to be conscientious in all things. She's marvellously good-looking. I wish that singing girl was at home and in bed. — What, in Heaven's name, is Frank at? Preaching, does he call it? I should call it a fine honest round of bruising. He's forgotten to give them even a text."

As Frank went on, even the girls were startled into attention; there was not a sound or a giggle, hardly a yawn, during the few minutes he spoke to them.

"I didn't think such a sermon was in him," Colclough thought. "And yet the words aren't much. I believe it's only that he's a real good fellow, and is enormously sorry for the poor creatures."

Directly he had given out the last hymn, Frank turned abruptly, and went into the vestry.

"Poor old chap!" Colclough thought, "no doubt he's surprised at himself."

Frank threw off his surplice, and leaned up against the table, trying to shut his ears to the girl's voice and get a grip on himself.

"Am I possessed, I wonder?" he thought. "This girl, whom I have never spoken to, has made me talk as no love for God or man has ever been able to do, and yet I have tried my best to walk straight and to keep my wits well about me. I wonder if I ought to take Jim's advice and fly. I'm afraid it's too late. After all, I've never yet made any particular fool of myself about a girl—why should I begin now? Besides, I have sufficient respect for myself to know

that if she wasn't worth some sort of emotion, I wouldn't feel as strongly as I do with regard to her."

He washed his hands and face, hoping that the new curate hadn't chanced to go to sleep and omitted to pronounce the blessing. Then he went cheerfully out into the night, almost cannoning against Colclough at the door.

"Is that you, Jim? I was just coming to hunt you up."

Colclough looked at him. "You're not going through with it, then?"

"I thought we arranged all that."

"Well, come on then, and recollect that, whatever happens, I told you so."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THEY turned the first corner past the church, stopped simultaneously, and looked irresolutely at one another, then Colclough burst out laughing.

"Well, what's to be done? Are we to wait here indefinitely and trust to Providence to guide her feet our way? Supposing Providence is against the business, as I have reason to suppose is the case?"

Frank laughed grimly, and the embarrassment and inconvenience of having to create your own conventions as you need them, struck him for the first time.

"The fact is unfortunate, but there's no denying it, we do look asses," he said.

"Speak for yourself, Frank. I am 'doing unto others,' and expect civility.—I say, here they come trooping down. We're fortunately too much in the shade to be seen; she must pass us, I suppose?"

"Yes, she will be sure to come this way."

"Are we to pounce out on them directly she passes? It's undignified on your part, and may be terrifying to the object. Weston, turn the other way, come home, and have a pipe. Well then, if you won't, button up your ulster and hide your shame. There's no reason you should bring your profession into disrepute."

Presently there was a pause in the crowd, and the men from their corner could see Margaret speaking to the others, Poll close beside her. Some of them shook their heads impatiently and went on; some hesitated and looked at her curiously, while they whispered together; a few assented at once to something she was proposing to them; some hur-

ried past, refusing to listen, and a few superior spirits sneered and laughed cynically, and went down the street singing an arrangement of one of the hymns they had just been hearing with a music-hall refrain.

The dark girl Colclough noticed particularly. She said a few words, then moved off in an opposite direction, with a languid, weary, delicious walk, as if nothing less than a chariot with gorgeously caparisoned steeds were her right, and her feet could hardly bear themselves on a rough pavement.

No one was in sight now but Margaret and Poll, and the two men emerged quietly from their shade. The next minute they wished they had remained there, for Margaret, who felt that they were following her, turned deliberately and glanced keenly from one to the other of them. She hesitated for an instant, then without a trace of embarrassment she addressed Frank.

"Did you want to speak to us?" she asked.

It seemed to Frank and Colclough as if, the same instant, they were all on their proper footing.

"She has had previous experiences," Colclough thought, with a sudden feeling of irritation against himself and his kind, "and I shouldn't think she was more than twenty."

"We do want to speak to you," Frank said with commendable coolness, "and there didn't seem to be any other way in which to do it. You are not in my parish, and I couldn't find out where you lived. I have tried several times after church to see you, but you had always gone; and, as no doubt you are aware, a certain amount of impertinence is permitted to a parson."

Margaret gave a little amused laugh.

"I shouldn't think," she said, "that any conventions would trouble you much if you wanted to gain an end. If one is to judge by your sermons, that is."

Colclough grunted inwardly. "There's no doubt about her, at any rate. But, upon my word, she appears to be a candid person."

"Probably you know my name—Weston—as you come *to this church,* and this is my friend, Mr. Colclough."

Poll hung a little in the rear and stared. There was always a floating notion of a prince in her inconsequent brain, who would some day swoop suddenly down and remove her liege lady in a fiery chariot or otherwise. Neither of these persons came at all up to her expectations, and a fiendish impulse seized her to "frighten 'em off." She had a rich stock of expedients to fall back on for such purposes. She decided, however, to wait and listen a little—she might find it interesting.

"I wonder," Colclough thought, looking keenly at Margaret, "if she means to enlighten us as to her business here."

Frank rarely troubled himself with vague wonderings when he could get to his point by more direct methods.

"I am a parson, then, and impertinent; we both agree on the last point, I see. In accordance with my character, which you dropped on with such speed and precision, I am going to ask what a girl of your age is doing here at this time of night and in such company as you were five minutes ago."

She looked quickly up at him; she was not quite absolutely sure yet. The uncompromising look of his ugly nose completely reassured her. It was self-respecting and trustworthy,

"Because one evening you preached a sermon that took hold of me and wouldn't let me go. It is so easy and so pleasant to keep one's eyes comfortably shut, but I couldn't manage it; some things you said forced them open, I think, and suggested other notions, and I wanted to see for myself if there was any truth in them."

"But it's curious you should be allowed, and in this locality."

"There's no one to prevent my doing what I like, and just now, and for some time to come, I shall have to live in this neighbourhood. I have loads of time on my hands, and I thought I would spend it by prowling round with open eyes, and getting to know some of the girls around me; and occasionally we understand each other."

"I should think there's not much doubt but you do. Curious that I myself have been thinking, for a long time past, that girls could do an enormous lot for one another —that is, if they would consent or be allowed to open their eyes."

The street, at this hour, was very quiet, and they were walking rather slowly, by Frank's connivance, so it was easy to talk comfortably ; in the day time, of course, this would have been impossible.

Margaret turned on him astonished.

"You don't mean to say," she asked, "that you want girls, ordinary girls, living in guarded homes and with nothing to shut their eyes upon, to come down into the conflict and bitterness of this life here, among girls who have been beaten about in it since their very babyhood. You don't mean that ?"

"But I do mean it. I think that girls have shut their eyes on the lives that other girls lead and have to lead, and on the dulness and horror of their surroundings, quite long enough. I mean unofficial, outside girls—not sisters, or nurses, or churchworkers."

"But you are a man. You don't know, and you can't know, that it would be quite impossible, and extremely cruel."

"So I've told him till I'm tired," put in Colclough.

"You do it," said Frank.

"That's different altogether. I had lived here for months, doing nothing, but detesting everything, and shutting my eyes whenever I could, and yet seeing daily, more and more, how life went. I had got over the first sick shock of grey horrors before I came into personal contact with one of the girls about me. I made no ignorant plunge into a dark, unknown, outcast land, where laughter and amusement are in some horrid way generally connected with evil. Why should ignorant girls' lives be spoilt with the practical knowledge—one only grasps it properly by actual contact—of this dulness and misery ? A girl could never be the same again once she knew—knew really." She broke off and looked oddly at him.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Colclough triumphantly. "So much for your insane schemes! It would be the death of the ordinary girl with no sense either of values or of humour."

"Rica, for example?" said Frank, half aside.

"You call her an average girl, do you?"

Frank took no notice of him; he was an affectionate brother in his way, but the classification of his sister hardly interested him at the moment. He looked uneasily at Margaret.

"But Miss ——"

"Daintree," said Margaret. She felt horribly guilty the moment after, and wondered if she should have told them her real name.

"Miss Daintree, you are a contradiction to all you say."

"But I told you I am different altogether."

"Of course you are," said Colclough. "Your voice is a sufficient witness to that." He was anxious to find out some definite trifle about the girl—she was inclined, seemingly, to generalise rather too much. "It's an unusual voice for a girl. I fancy the life you have chosen," he remarked tentatively, "may have something to do with its quality."

"I really don't see how my life can affect it in the least. I have been well taught, and I am taking good lessons. My mother, I believe, had a wonderful voice, and my grandmother—very likely my great-grandmother. Mine, what there is of it, comes at least through three generations,—so my master says. As for my life, I didn't choose it, it chose me."

"I wonder," said Colclough gently, "if it made a wise choice."

"I should think it was a matter of certainty that it did," said Frank, feeling vindictive.

Margaret looked from one to the other of them and laughed amusedly.

"You consider me then as a scheme? It is delightful to have become suddenly an object of such interest. I shall take your conception of how far I am valuable as a scheme,

Mr. Weston, with reservation. I notice you idealise. And now," she said, hesitating, "I suppose you're going farther on?"

Frank had no notion of being got rid of just yet.

"Suppose," he said artlessly, "that you help me to thresh out my scheme and make it practical? We're bound for the same goal, I fancy, only that each of us prefers his own track."

She again looked at the two. She was in a pleasurable little simmer of excitement; it was like meeting suddenly with shod human tracks on a desert island. But there was Mrs. Bent to consider. What would she say? They might only increase her usual irritating doubts and fears a hundredfold.

But their voices were so soothing, it was stimulating and delicious not to have to feel as if one were eternally pursuing h's and panting to oil vocal chords.

"We are just going to have supper," she said; "we expect a great many of the girls around, and if you will come too, we shall be so glad." She remembered with a pang that she had altogether forgotten Poll. She turned round to her. "Won't we, Poll?" she asked compunctiously.

"Yes, Miss Margaret, very glad—of wot, Miss?" she added in a hoarse whisper.

Margaret laughed. "Glad if these gentlemen will come to supper with us—the clergyman who preached and his friend," she explained.

"Oh yes, Miss; there's lots o' beef, and the old woman 'll be that proud to see any as respectable as them," she remarked in an unaffected aside.

This gratifying communication put the consciences at their ease, and Colclough's alacrity in accepting the invitation was as marked as Frank's.

"Haven't you a lot to put up with?" Colclough asked.

He felt that he ought to be behind with the fat girl; he knew that Weston's one wish was to kick him; but it interested him to watch the other girl, and she had a charming voice to listen to. He kept his place with a pleasant air of *assurance.*

"I have," she said simply, "and with such unnecessary things often. It is sometimes astonishing to me how stupid men are. They surely have experience to go on. Have you considered all this in your ideal scheme?" she asked slowly, looking at Frank. "Did you take this drawback into consideration? Or possibly," she added, "living as I do in this place, among these surroundings, may have taken something from me, and that the mistake is natural."

"It's altogether unnatural," said Frank, "and only means that men are chiefly asses."

The direct, uncompromising, impersonal way in which she spoke of these things and of herself was a shock in an odd way. She put herself, as it were, outside of her girlhood, and stood uncomplainingly and critically aloof with her experience. Her attitude was new to the men, and it touched them. It also made them blush a little, in their consciences, not on their cheeks, "as a man is able." It was unpleasant to think that other men should be such fools.

"Then," she said, "that makes your scheme more than ever impossible. It's funny," she went on, "I thought once or twice that, if ever I had occasion to want any of you from a clergyman's point of view, I should go to you. The others whine a good deal, and you never do. I have had a great deal to bear in my time," she added, with the manner of countless ages of experience, "from that tone in prayer and in the praising of God."

"Do you know why the other fellows whine? It's because they're always underfed and sometimes hungry. I should whine smart enough if I endured life under the conditions these men do, weighed down by babies and bad diet."

"Then," she said unsentimentally, "a fund should be provided to find them properly and to take the babies off their minds. It struck me they suffered from the eternal, overpowering dulness of the neighbourhood, and they have a most unenjoyable and depressing way with them. But their underfeeding is a horrid thought. It worries me with all the people about here. What a delightful person she

who wrote 'I thank the goodness and the grace' must have been—so young and dear and ignorant! A person one would like to look at, and feel, and hear laugh."

Colclough looked at her and wished she was not quite so uncanny; yet there was no complaint, no note of it; she was always to herself a mere outsider.

"I wish," she began again, "you had not told me of those men. I shall always consider them now from the food point of view, and wonder what they have had for their dinners, and hope, at least, that it wasn't fried fish or Irish stew. The streets here live on these things; it's part of the misery of these regions: one gets so wolfishly in earnest about food."

"But you surely——"

She laughed aloud. "Oh! not myself. We have excellent food. But every one else. It somehow has given me a shock to think that the men who are to raise the masses—isn't that the word?—have not only the horror of the masses to contend against, but these commonplace discomforts of their own. No wonder they look serious and uninviting."

Frank opened his eyes and peered at her through his spectacles. She certainly had opinions, and she announced them.

"If the babies are a further burden on their minds," she said, "would they not be better to have remained celibate, as in the Romish Church?"

Colclough laughed softly.

"Possibly," said Frank; "but we're not all downtrodden with babies."

"No; and then you don't whine, but cheer up and stimulate your congregation. It's stimulating that everything about here wants, I think. And now, here's our house. But Mrs. Bent, my old nurse, with whom I live, is very nervous. I must explain you to her. Strange faces perplex her. Will you wait just a minute?"

She disappeared inside the house, and darted into the room; but Poll was before her, spluttering out, with many calls on the "Lor'!" and "Goodness Gracious!" the approach of the distinguished visitors.

"Miss Margaret, dear heart, what is it?" said Mrs. Bent, gazing in silent horror at Poll, wondering if she had indeed and in truth verified her frequent predictions and taken leave altogether of her senses.

"Mrs. Bent, one of our clergymen and his friend are coming in to supper. You don't mind, do you, dear?"

Mrs. Bent put on her spectacles and examined the girl. She looked flushed, and bright, and pleased.

"My dear," Mrs. Bent said, "black clothes covers all sorts. I have had a long experience of life." She shook her head, weary with its weight of years. "You're young, but it's too late now. Bring 'em in, dear." She smoothed her apron, and waited—doubting.

CHAPTER XXV.

"SHE seems to be built up chiefly from a groundwork of hankering after happiness," said Colclough, growing cold with waiting.

"But it seems to be altogether for other people. She appears to have got out of wanting that sort of thing for herself. Her laugh explains her, I fancy. It's a breaking-up of nature through circumstances."

"A breaking-up—hang it all! Frank, say it again."

Frank was engaged in wondering how much longer they were to stand there.

"Will you step into my parlour?" muttered Colclough.

"I wish we had the chance!" growled the other.

"It's a seemly expedition, taking it all round, isn't it?"

Directly he was out of the girl's sight and uninfluenced, except by a hideous sensation of cold in the draughty doorway, Colclough felt an impulse to sheer off on to the expedient and moral track.

"Supposing the Vicar should happen to be out on a sick call, or otherwise on the war-path, and came along?"

"Fortunately, he's snoring."

"I wonder if we shall get a chance to dig into her antecedents. You, with your parson's antennæ now——"

"I have other and less savoury uses for that part of my professional person. Besides, no one but an old woman would want to rake up what that girl wishes to be silent about. She is strong enough to stand alone—to be her own past."

"Oh, that's satisfactory, any way."

"Your Indian experiences, or lack of them, in women, *Jim, have made you* rather an ass."

"One needn't go to India to be an ass. What's she at, in Heaven's name? The cold has got to my uttermost corners."

"Here she is. Stop shivering. The room will be too small for that kind of thing, I fancy."

Margaret had been delayed by several quite unnecessary preparations which at the last moment Mrs. Bent had nervously insisted upon being made, and which Poll's frantic haste had considerably retarded.

When she brought her visitors boldly up, Mrs. Bent performed two solemn curtsies, took in the men, gave them one rapid turnover in her mind, then she did her manners.

"Poll, girl, you forget your duties. Dust chairs for the gentlemen—them, next the fire." She then turned to Frank. He was not very old, probably not very wise, but he had at least the label of respectability upon him—the hall-mark of a long waistcoat—and he looked wholesome. The other, she reflected, "looked a deal too broken for his years."

There was at least no doubt as to her first duty—which was without delay to make plain to these gentlemen her young lady's proper position.

"I am pleased," she said with severe dignity, "that my young lady should consort with them of her own station. She's young, sir, and trustful, and thinks to make others as good as herself. I am but an old foolish body, and believes in old ways, and thinks that them wild young hussies, as also the stray creatures, should be left to the Lord and to them as is appointed to gather 'em in—not as many of 'em stays as is gathered, which is my experience. I make bold to hope that you, being a minister of God, will advise my young lady according."

Margaret was satisfied for the present; she could not hear what the old woman said, but she was evidently "taking counsel," in which case she could not consider the young man as an unmitigated wolf, so she gave her uninterrupted attention to Colclough.

"Mrs. Bent," said Frank, "sit comfortably down in your arm-chair, and we can talk properly. Do you know, it has

been my idea and hope for ever so long now that young ladies might be induced to step out of the beaten track, and do something of the same sort of thing that your young lady is doing. Possibly Christ might approve of it even if their maiden aunts didn't. What do you think?"

She looked at him grimly, took off her spectacles, and wiped them deliberately.

"Oh dear, oh dear," she thought, "have she got round him already? and the other the same no doubt, and never set eyes on 'em till an hour ago. Oh dear!" She put on her glasses and said stiffly, "Them as Christ bade to go into the highways and hedges after such like were men as knew the world, rough fishermen moreover, not young ladies with the best blood in the county in 'em, sir." She paused, and let that work. "And must I point out to you, sir," she added with a tinge of scornful wonder, "that my young lady is a deal too pretty for such uses?"

The reminder, if unnecessary, was convenient; it gave him the opportunity for a conscientious stare. Colclough didn't count for the minute, as he was watching her from another point of view.

Even in a London drawing-room, Frank decided, she would have set going a quiver of distrust in himself, in every mother's son in it; here, in this quaint room in the wilderness, she was amazing, and a shock. One felt a little uncomfortable sense of a want of proportion in her placing.

Since Margaret had lifted up her head and compelled circumstances to serve her she had grown in every way. There was little to be seen now of her old indefiniteness of shape; her possibilities were expanding healthily to perfection.

Neither of the men could have told you even as much as the colour of the dress she wore; they only knew that it was just precisely what they would themselves have chosen for her; and Frank thought that all the other girls of his acquaintance must be rather dense not to do their hair just as she did hers. There was one little thing about her, however, *that worried* and annoyed Frank—he connected it in some

way with a man; it was one line between her eyebrows, furrowed in her creamy young flesh; it had a way of contracting now and then, and deepening, and it kept company with an old-experienced look of gloom that occasionally leapt into her eyes, making them black and heavy instead of brilliant and grey.

Margaret felt that Mrs. Bent's confidence in the Church was getting a shock. She came up to her.

"How late it is!" she said. "I wonder why they don't come."

A sudden idea struck Poll. She had been sitting up stiff, twiddling her thumbs as "genteel as you please," and picking up information. She bounced up and imparted her idea to Margaret's ear,—

"Belike they seen the passon."

Frank laughed. "Oh, I hope that's not it. Is it, Mrs. Bent?"

"Go and see to that coffee, Poll," Mrs. Bent commanded, her fingers twitching to box the girl's ears, "and boil the milk, and don't take your eyes off it, or else it'll go over."

Poll went glibly enough. She could hear very well from the passage, and see too; there was no mortal sense in staying in the kitchen.

"Keep her eyes on the milk indeed!" She winked as soon as she was out of range of observation, and stretched. It was embarrassing "having passon's eyes a-samplin' o' you."

"Take no notice of her, please, sir," said Mrs. Bent deprecatingly,—"a poor foolish thing as my young lady have took up and apprenticed to a dressmaker. She does as well as she can, poor crittur; but she's a torment and an abiding unpleasantness, as you may see, sir."

"Are those girls ever rude to Miss Daintree?"

"I can't say they be," she replied reluctantly. "They're not to say rude, neither to her nor to me. But they're noisy, sir, and I'm always uneasy lest they should forget. There's one girl, sir, as makes me quake," she went on, oblivious to the fact that the parson's eyes were wandering and his ears

doing likewise. "A dark, big one; there's summat fearsome in her. She won't neither eat nor speak. She only comes to hear Miss Margaret sing. She's a queer, mad young woman, and that awful." The old woman fingered her glasses nervously and trembled. "The last night she rose up in the middle of a song and marched out into the night, like a great impudent statute. The Lord forgive me if I misapprehend Him, but I fear sore He have clean forsook her. And to think of the likes of her and my lamb a-standin' cheek by jowl," she said, half to herself.

She had forgotten the parson and her manners, and only thought of the hideousness of the fact. Frank brought his eyes from Margaret's face to hers.

It *was* awful from her point of view, and, in fact, from that of most other people's.

He turned and again looked at Margaret, to give courage to his idea. She was laughing and eager, and her excited young face seemed as if untouched by one crude truth. For a minute he wavered and was inclined to go over to the side of the enemy; but he was a dogged soul, and his idea had been brought forth with fear and trembling.

"No," he concluded; "she may have touched pitch, but she's not defiled. Mouths don't lie, especially adult mouths like hers, whatever proverbs may do. Mrs. Bent," he said gently, "I quite understand all your objections, and how bitter the pain they breed must be; but, if I were you, whenever I feel like that, I would take a good look at your young lady, and think of the white doves among the pots. I am convinced you would then feel all right in no time."

Mrs. Bent sighed, and wished to the Lord that, just for a minute or two even, he were a woman. Frank was awfully sorry for her, but he felt that he had done his duty nobly, and wished he could kick Colclough. There was fair play in everything, and, after all, he had discovered the girl. Mrs. Bent waived her momentary objection to his sex, and went on placidly.

"It helps and cheers me, sir, to talk with you, even though *you see fit to go* contrary to me. You, being a minister of

God, it do seem natural-like to talk confidential," she went on, with gentle satisfaction, happily unconscious of the goings-on inside her hearer. It was so pleasant to have such a nice polite young man to listen to one, an ordained minister too, and that friendly and interested.

"I wouldn't so much mind now if Miss Margaret would but speak to 'em like the ladies 'as carries tracks, only gentler-like, and with some common sense. If she would advise 'em now, and bring their sins home to 'em, and give 'em suitable texts. Lord knows," she sighed sadly, "the book of God reeks with such, as well you know, sir. If she would help 'em, but keep herself to herself and show them *their* place. They're lawless, wild creatures, sir, and needs a rare amount of placing. But she don't, Lord love you; she speaks to 'em as if she was one of 'em."

"The beastly bad taste of the fellow and his grin," Frank reflected ruefully, "and her dear old voice is putting me to sleep too."

"She laughs with 'em, sir—oh dear, oh dear!—she sings to 'em, songs and hymns just as they ask for 'em, and she sets and eats with 'em, and all the same as if she enjoyed her vittles. I sets too. What's good enough for her is surely good enough for me. But every morsel chokes me, having that much respect for myself. Poor Poll is as good as she knows how to be, which ain't much, poor body; but them others! They're best left in the Lord's hands; He made 'em, and no doubt He understands 'em."

She sighed despondently, and tried hard to believe her own words, but not with any marked success.

"Hearken to 'em," she said; "here they come."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"ANYTHING of a change must be a bettering of the present state of things," Frank thought.

He could not of course now hope to get Margaret to himself, but at least the tantalising spectacle of Colclough monopolising her at his ease would be removed from his sight. Then there was Mrs. Bent's prim, pronounced, disapproving touch of silence, producing expectancy to be thankful for.

He bore down on Colclough, and delivered himself of a few sentences; then he listened in rather an unamiable abstraction to the patter of feet outside the door, followed by a succession of rapid knocks. He could hear Margaret welcoming and talking to a medley of voices—quite, indeed, as if she had been "one of them." As he listened to her, his belief in his scheme grew each moment more beset with reservations and complications, his primeval enthusiasm was losing in concentration, his mind was rapidly getting itself into an irrational general-objection state. It struck him he had better pull up and watch the proceedings.

As each girl appeared in her turn, she filed up to Mrs. Bent and did her unwilling duty by the old woman, in her own particular fashion; and there was no sameness whatever in the outward deportment of these young people. Many of them had slipped or been thrust outside of the laws and codes that govern ordinary conduct, and though each and all among them carried about with her a remnant of what she had learned in other days, there was invariably a marked individuality in what she had acquired, in the way *or in lieu* of manners since those old times. Always old

times with the majority of Margaret's guests, even if dewy-eyed childhood was still with them. The step from virtue to vice is a quick little one, but it constitutes an era of unutterable length in any woman's life.

Times that are so fresh and young to-day, bubbling over with mere baby-life, are old to-morrow, and grey, with a curious, unsound note of declining and decay in them.

Mrs. Bent responded to the girls' greeting with a grave, distant dignity that tried their constitutions, and Poll, from behind Margaret, nodded at her old chums with a grotesque mixture of superiority and deprecation. The try at airs was mild, and only showed its ridiculous head on compulsion, as it were, for the parson's sake, but it was Poll's first and last flight into higher altitudes. A speedy quencher was put on it. From each girl in turn the luckless daw got the retort uncourteous, veiled under divers forms, none of them tending to edification. The old blood indeed surged up, and she gave them back all she got and in kind—but strictly under her breath. After that one spurt, however, Poll returned, once and for ever, to her ordinary *rôle* of blundering and admiring second fiddle.

Margaret noticed directly they had disposed of Poll, the nods and winks and covert nudges of her unaffected and candid guests at sight of the men. Whereupon she felt a sudden hot rush of embarrassment. She flung one half-perplexed, half-amused look at the crowd, then she announced in a clear, unabashed voice, and with a comprehensive all-round glance,—

"One of our clergymen and his friend have come to supper, and to help afterwards with the singing.—You'll both have to sing whether you can or not," she commanded in a rapid voice as she passed them. "Goodness, if they haven't a note between them!" she thought, as they both assented with what struck her as rather a suspicious alacrity.

The young people instantly regained their accustomed ease. For a minute, in spite of winks and giggles, the sight of a full-fledged parson and his "hanger-on"—possibly a Scripture reader, with nothing on earth to do but to "ᴘᴇʏ

round"—had caused a slight uneasy flutter of apprehension in this dove-cote, and the notion of a sermon was already floating in mutinous minds. This, the parson's cheerfulness and readiness to sing to a great extent dispelled.

"If it's only an 'ym," giggled one young thing, with a toss of her tousled head, "it'll keep 'im off our souls."

Presently more knocks had been heard and answered, and there were now about twenty in the room, all told.

The men had been wondering, awe-stricken, how it held them, and watched Margaret and Poll curiously pulling out from under sofas and reaching down from the tops of cupboards with each fresh batch of girls, little stools and boxes, all over chintz and ribbons.

"Who made them?" Frank asked in an interval.

"Poll and I. It was an awful experience, we were nearly frantic by the time the stuff was cut out, not to say fastened on. The ribbons are mostly to stop holes or cover puckers."

The only arm-chair in the room was Mrs. Bent's; that was never moved or meddled with, and Margaret took good care that plenty of space should be left round it. There was a dado round the room which seemed to be one blaze of brilliant colouring, on a ground of delicate grey.

Frank found that the colouring came from innumerable fans, thrown helter-skelter over the grey paper, and the confusion of dusty soft reds and blues, the glints of gold and delicate violets, and shimmerings of silver, with here and there shadings of ebony black and gorgeous oranges and yellows, had an odd, charming, crazy effect. Above the dado was a shelf of natural wood, fastened on with brackets, on which stood morsels of china, and an amazing quaint medley of odds and ends, only to be found in little old shops in back streets. Some of them were Eastern things brought home by sailors, and they smelt of spices, and suggested dead Egyptians. There were vases of flowers too, and dead grasses and palms, and scores of other small things to enliven light minds for a passing moment.

"What suggested the arrangement?" said Frank, laughing and waylaying her.

"To counteract the drabs and the greys of the world—our world here among the endless ugly rows of ugly houses. One gets to long for colour. If I gave way to the natural woman, I should this minute be clothed in scarlet and purple, and all the girls feel just the same; but they do, as you may perceive, give way to the natural woman, and throw on colour whenever they can. I sometimes envy them their capacity to wear brilliant inconsequent bows. The craving for colour in these parts is a disease, I think, and wants treatment, only parish doctors don't include it in their course."

Meanwhile, Colclough was prowling round on his own account. He had chanced on a book-shelf, and was finding some mute amusement in the wear and tear of the novels and comic papers, and in the spotless purity of a large selection of scientific primers, a stock of which Margaret had laid in in one foolish moment, when her brain had been addled by the platform utterances of a lad from Oxford. He was a charming boy, with great faith, and a strong belief in the upward tendency of the primeval mind, and he depressed Margaret frightfully. She felt she was failing in laying a solid foundation, so she went out repentant and bought the primers.

"She's young yet," thought Colclough, with the pleasant chuckle of one who isn't.

Then he turned round to watch her. But he first reviewed Frank, and wished to God he was well out of it all. Margaret certainly bore herself to Frank's satisfaction and his own. She was going about among her guests, gay and bright, talking and laughing with perfect ease and unrestraint; the girls felt happy and at ease in her presence. Yet each one of them knew, and moreover felt the fact to each individual finger-tip, that she was as high above them as the Heavens are above the earth. Her upright, honourable, fine womanhood was a curious sight in such company. Her alert, open-eyed common sense struck both Frank and Colclough with particular force. Nothing escaped her: every nod, and wink, and wriggle of her guests was taken notice

of; she went from one to the other of them, turning sulks to grins, subduing odd cackles of impious laughter, bringing forward new interests to wandering minds—for the minute transforming hearts and getting the better of nature.

Frank sat down comfortably, so that he might carry on his observations with greater ease. She caught his eyes on her, however, and Colclough's at the same moment, and concluding they meant to philosophise on her in her character of scheme, while she worked, she pounced on them, and before they quite knew what she demanded of them, she had them entertaining her guests as actively as herself.

They began presently to perceive that there was, in spite of facts, an oddly wholesome atmosphere of primitive Christianity abroad in the quaint motley room, and the only one it singled out to skip was the one professing Christian in it, poor sad Mrs. Bent, who still sat aloof, longing for the end of it all, and for the last sight of the "creatures."

During the wait before supper, Frank's eyes were drawn to the trouble in the good old face. He put aside his own affairs, and tried to soften it in his kind way; but it was a hopeless task. It seemed impossible to raise the cold veil of reserve in which the old inherited peasant instincts of decency had wrapped the woman. No appeal had any effect on her gentle, timid, perplexed alarms.

For, not only was she in desperate straits on account of the unseemliness of the position for her young lady, but on her own account she was in terror, lest she should be caught in the stream, succumb weakly, forget her upbringing, and cease to keep herself to herself. The patient, fearful, watchful, old face was a suggestion of pathos to Margaret and to the men. On the contrary, it clearly aggravated the rest of that gathering. It was a constant mute protest against their social standing—or their want of it. Mrs. Bent was, in fact, the death's head at this feast.

At last, all the girls who meant to come had evidently arrived, and after a significant whisper from Poll, Margaret put Mrs. Bent into Frank's hands, and told him she expected

him to carve. She looked a shade whiter, and a little different.

Frank wondered, as his eyes swept over the knots of chattering creatures, how it would all end, how long the girl would stand erect and alone, to throw her feeble strength against the tide of foul waters that swept about her feet, but that could not touch so much as the hem of her garment.

"God bless her, or rather he has blessed her," he thought, "however it ends."

But how long would she stand erect, with shining eyes and hope to keep her heart warm? How soon would come the moment when something would break within her—give way; when an aching void would take the place of the warm fulness, and she would know, when the horror of it was past, and when her eyes had grown clear and she could think again, that it was the death of idealisation that shook her, and that, henceforth and for ever, it must be duty that would lead her, not rosy idea ever any more.

Then would come the inexorable dimming of the sweet daring eyes, the stoop of the proud shoulders, the bowing of the head, and worse than all these things, there would come a note of death into the living ring of her laughter. And over all her dreams the sober sickening slime of "common sense" and the "possible."

At this point Frank's practical mind hinted to him that he wanted a smoke and that he was hungry, and had besides only met the young lady two hours before. He took possession of Mrs. Bent, and resolved still to cherish his scheme, and in the meantime do his duty by the carving. Under wholesome labour, sentiment returned to its proper place, and Frank began to "take notice" again, and to order his conduct and regulate his thoughts in a rational way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MARGARET, backed by Poll, had brought into the arrangements of the table much grace and more realism. Considering the season, the show of flowers down the long table was lavish. Frank was surprised, for the distribution of flowers among his people was part of his own creed, and he knew very well how much they cost him. If he had not been a man he would have seen in a glance that the effect was produced by a great deal of green, and by a comparatively few pink azaleas, and these had been a bargain of Poll's getting in a late foray down the New Cut.

Margaret was beginning to learn that she must husband her resources if they were to last out the time to her majority. She had considerable expenses in helping girls to apprenticeships and situations; indeed her only difficulty was not to spend every penny she had and all at once; but she had at her back Mrs. Bent, wise with the wisdom of small savings.

All among the flowers there stood little china dishes of pickles, among which onions took the lead, and everywhere were oranges, apples, and nuts, with crackers aggressively thrust forward. There had been a slight omission in this particular the first night, and Margaret's teeth had felt on edge for the next week.

There seemed to Frank to be enough almonds and raisins on the table to supply a regiment, which showed that he was better up in the lowest and highest possibilities of his neighbours than in their natural tastes,—which ignorance Poll took good care that Margaret should have none of.

This happened to be a cold meat supper, being Sunday

night, so beef and pork-pie were the mainstay of the feast. But when the supper fell on a week night, Mrs. Bent's house was deliciously redolent of the fumes of stewed tripe and onions, and liver and bacon, and spluttering saveloys on white potato beds; and the combined scent was often the most edifying memory that Margaret's guests carried about for years after in their queer rubbish-bags of minds. Even a reek of onions can hold a touch of sentiment in it.

It was an odd table and oddly filled. There was hardly a girl around it who was over twenty-four, or who went by the name handed on to her by her ancestors, or who, except at odd soft moments, would tell you a story of her young days with a word of truth in it.

And it was only at such odd soft times that any of them realised, with any distinctness, the truth about herself, or cared a rap to be any other. And yet there are ways and means to get at every solitary young specimen of this great wild tribe, during those odd times, when the heart within her is soft, and sick, and malleable; to catch it, so to speak, on the hop, and then to strike in with words and methods, bracing, compelling, and human. To force open eyes blind with folly, or the gnawing need of food, or the mad young yearning for pleasure—to compel the whole being to a turbulent convulsive recoil from itself. The difficulty then is to help on the upward impetus, that the recoil may become permanent and abiding. Whoever attempts the task will need a sound head, free of mawkishness, and a steady hand, lest the pendulum escape from his clutch and the wretch be swept back to her wretchedness. And then God help her—or give her a fresh start elsewhere, where even the poorest and lowest woman of God's making understands and reverences herself, and where men have at last admitted their responsibility.

By the time Weston had filled the plates, and got Mrs. Bent now and then to creep gently out of herself, he found he could rest and take a leisurely survey of the position. The company seemed now very much in touch with itself and its supper, and the conversation, whatever it lacked in

the glasses and taste, was made up for amply in ease and briskness—yet within bounds.

Margaret was still dispensing wedges from the big pie, but at the very height of her busiest time, with a dozen hungry eyes on her, and Poll waiting with two plates, she never for an instant relaxed her constant alert observation of eye and ear. It was necessary. She had the most combustible material, yet known, to deal with,—the mere reflection of a spark would have been enough to cause an explosion,—and the meat, and the drink, and the hilarity that comes of the breaking of bread together were having their effect. It was very much like hob-nobbing round a volcano, Frank thought with an appreciative grin, bred of his adventurous youth, as he insisted, in spite of her remonstrances, in filling Mrs. Bent's glass with beer. It was a good brand, generally liked better of men than of women—women's drink generally being, as is well known, but poor stuff. Whether this comes to pass from the vile tyranny of man, or through the pressure of original sin, is a question yet to be answered. In dealing faithfully with it, possibly one stigma might be lifted from the harassed sex.

"Who chooses your beer, Mrs. Bent?"

She reddened, and reflected on him swallowing his, with pain, and a touch of spiritual pride.

"Miss Margaret, sir," she replied in a low voice, pushing her untasted glass away.

"Mrs. Bent, I'm half a doctor, if being filled to the chin with prescriptions, every one contradicting its neighbour, goes for anything, and I prescribe that beer for you. It's the best I've tasted for months. I shall ask Miss Daintree for the name of her wine merchant."

Poll heard him and uttered one prolonged and irrepressible giggle. "I niver—oh Lor', no, I niver!" she muttered in an agony of delight.

But Mrs. Bent's sense of decency was hurt to the quick.

"To think that even in this—this pandering to the flesh of the creatures, he aids and abets her." She took a slow, *steady look at him.* "His eyes ain't them of wolves," she

concluded, and tried to eat, but the meat tasted dry to her, her thirst was enormous, and water "that indigestible." She looked round and felt a sinful and unseemly envy of her irresponsible neighbours; her eyes turned again to "the minister," and she gave a short, troubled sigh. He freshened up her glass cheerfully, and began to talk to her on outside matters, till the gentle, cracked old laugh broke out, unwillingly at first, but gradually relaxing and forgetting its bonds, till at last Frank's end of the table was as merry as Margaret's, and Mrs. Bent found after a little, that not only had she drunk her beer and enjoyed her supper, but that she was talking to "them creatures" as if she had been a "mother to 'em." For one wild minute, she thought of mentioning the matter to the Lord at the very next opportunity, but when it came, she remembered her up-bringing, and Whom she was speaking to, and flurriedly decided to bring up another subject.

After one particular round with the beer, Poll grew painfully alert. She kept hovering about a certain quartette of young women whose whisperings were gradually rising. Some old, well-remembered note had struck on Poll's practised ear, and all the watch-dog had risen in her. The demand for more beer from one of the four was met with lordly indifference, a solemn reminding frown, and a thumb dexterously shot over one shoulder, which produced a scream of laughter from the clique and a huge poke. It was trying to Poll's dignity, especially as just at that moment she caught "the passon's eye on 'er, and 'im laffin'."

She held her ground, however, and proceeded to change plates with a will. As she rounded the corner nearest the insurgents, with one well-directed shot a large walnut struck her in the eye, and reduced her to a spluttering, threatening mass.

Margaret, who had watched the affair from the start, and had let it go on, hoping that some fresh imp-begotten impulse might crop up in the little knot and distract its attention, now turned to the four, who, although they were giggling as hard as they could, yet felt clearly ill at ease.

"You've blinded Poll, you see," she said, "so I suppose you're prepared to do her work. Nancy and Madge, will you take this side, and you, Flo and Claudine, the other? and, Poll, you had better sit down till your eye is better."

There was no attempt at gainsaying her order. In a minute the four were brandishing about plates with "clatter enough to deafen one," Mrs. Bent observed plaintively. The noise was begotten partly of spite, partly of the exuberance of their spirits, and though sundry shrugs were to be seen and divers matters might have been audible to acute ears, there was no thought even of jibbing.

"Her hand is light enough," Colclough reflected, "but there's no doubt as to its strength. It's not altogether the best training for a domestic career. There's an advantage in the common groove after all." He took another interested inspection. "On the whole, I should not recommend this school to the natural man to select from. I wonder how long she has been conducting this kind of entertainment; I must ascertain. Frank is quite useless in the detective line, poor beggar. What will the family say?—and the superexcellent step-mother? Lady Gordon's money and her certainty of his coming bishopric, poor chap!"

When Poll felt a little restored, she swallowed the rest of her visible indignation, and with one eye on the interests of morality and the other on the paying off of old scores, proceeded to substitute cups for glasses.

Meanwhile Colclough, when he had placed Frank's situation, fell to considering his own, and found it anything but agreeable. His volcanic neighbours were beginning to jar, and to prevent anything like ease or contentment of mind. A sudden remark from a candid-eyed young person on his left suggested to him that it's sometimes a little difficult to be quite successful in the *rôle* of a man and a brother. He looked at Frank with a melancholy pang.

"All very well for him," he thought; "his clothes are his salvation. My dress carries neither conviction nor respect."

With an impulse of self-preservation, he plunged wildly

into vigorous conversation, scattered wide in an impersonal way, and he set himself sedulously to attend to the condition of his neighbours' plates. After a quite short time his tactics bore fruit; for he had a good heart and a great pity for the reckless inconsequent youth of the girls. This feeling brought some fresh unusual tone into his manner, which awoke the curiosity of the damsels, and, in trying to find out more, they forgot their "knowingness," and ended in "behaving" in spite of themselves. They found it queer but distinctly pleasant to experience a whole batch of totally new sensations.

Vague wonderings and glimmerings of misty thought were stirring in odd corners of the hearts pulsating in those grotesque prinked-out bodies. The suppers had from the first been an enlightenment to them, a new sensation, but the introduction into them of the two men was something more; it revealed a quite new side of life to every girl present.

Hardly one of them had any real notion of what a gentleman—that is, a man at his best—is like; they came across them now and again professionally, as clergymen perhaps, or in "the way of business"; but in that latter capacity—they were quite conscious of the fact too—any one of them was to any man, gentle or simple, a thing, a detail, a speck of dust to be flicked off one's mind and forgotten, as dust from a smoked cigar off one's coat, not thought of as a sentient piece of one's own flesh and blood, with a heart in her and tears, and a soul, more or less.

The natural service of man to woman was a new experience,—the kindly deference to her, and interest in all her little wants, the very fact of finding such trifles as pickles and salt supplied to her before she had even asked for them, and by a man—her natural prey or enemy, or mere peg to hang jokes on—was strange and fresh.

The dignity of the intercourse between men and women was shown to these girls for the first time in their existence, and it was so different from that portrayed in tracts or "penny dreadfuls" that it took their breath away, and, at

first, perplexity forewent enjoyment. But every woman born of woman takes kindly to man's homage, so these girls were no exception; but as they had only known men hitherto from other points of view, a good many alien things got mixed up with their pleasure, and some of them were uncomfortable, and had to be kept under by a torrent of rapid speech as decent and in order as inordinate haste would allow.

Once during the meat course a little girl fresh from the country and new to her work, consequently hungry, in making a lunge into her beef cut a deep gash in her finger, and in her uncontrolled way expressed her feelings in a piercing yell. It was a nasty cut, and justified some audible expression of the emotions. Cololough, after a vindictive look at Weston for his luck in escaping the nuisance, rose to the occasion like a brick, and tied her up in a masterly style, learnt in his houseful of natives.

To keep her quiet he told her a rapid succession of savage anecdotes, with local colour powerfully laid on, while she quivered and squealed in his hands. She found out, by some curious process, that it really paid better on the whole to be good than bad; it was easier all round, and saved embarrassment. She was frightened and subdued when she sat down again, and there were some vague intentions, making for decency, astir in her primitive heart.

Frank undoubtedly might have made better use of his time, and have collected more ideas for his schemes, had he not been so largely employed in individual investigation; but he had some new light thrown on old views that in his ordinary parson's beat might have escaped him. He found himself frequently arrested, pulled up by tiny traits and tendencies and small possibles and impossibles in his neighbours, which brought many modifications into his mind and more into his methods.

The suspicion of the adjacent volcano sharpened what wits he kept clear, and, taking things all round, he was really quite surprisingly alert.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THEY had all returned to the front room, and were packing themselves away hilariously, when a single, swift, imperious knock was struck on the outer door. Margaret went out and came back directly with the dusky girl. She declined either to eat anything or to take off her things in Margaret's room. She, however, removed her cloak and her little bonnet languidly, and handed them to Poll, in an unseeing, imperial way. Poll received them blandly, and was about to drop them into the grate when Margaret frustrated her by herself carrying them off to safe quarters.

Having greeted Mrs. Bent with polished insolence, the girl turned and took serene stock of the men. She had a lofty contempt for persons of that order, and so she informed them in one subtle glance.

Weston felt it would do him a lot of good to see her in course of reformation at the wash-tub, and Colclough wondered, with a melancholy twinge, if she could possibly mistake him for a district visitor.

She dismissed the pair from her mind with a slight, intricate, mocking smile, and looked round the room, nodding carelessly at one or two of the girls, who returned her impertinent recognition with half-shamefaced, half-fearful defiance. They feared her, it was plainly to be seen, and an uneasy silence fell on the assembly.

"We had better give them something fresh to think of," said Margaret to Weston.

He and Colclough had been feeling rather low under the young lady's classification and from want of a smoke, and so for the minute, as neither of them could get hold of Margaret, they had taken refuge with one another.

"I shall sing first," she went on; "and then will one of you be ready? Long intervals never do in our society."

"I can't sing a note," said Colclough guiltily; "I only said it to stop a gap."

"I thought so. You are evidently accustomed to stopping gaps. What can you do? Can you do conjuring tricks or anything? They never go till two o'clock," she explained hurriedly, "and if there's not heaps to do to-night we shall have trouble. You see the last girl, that beautiful, wonderful-looking one; she simply terrifies me. I can't sing half as long when she's here. Think of something," she ordered, turning on Colclough, "and make reparation for stopping a gap with such an atrocious untruth."

"I can do a handkerchief trick," he meekly admitted.

"Yes," said Frank, "he can. Did one for my night school lately. It went all right till he suddenly forgot the point. Just at that minute the platform caved in and he fell, feet up. The audience were quite satisfied and cheered: they thought it was the point of the trick."

"That," said Margaret composedly, "would be quite too melodramatic for us. We're critical as to art. The girl there would find you out if you went the eighth of a note astray. There isn't a girl here to-night," she went on, "with all her featherheadedness, who isn't sharper than the generality of her kind. We're told no experience is lost. It's rather interesting to find it out for oneself, and not to have altogether to take books' words for it." She knitted her brows curiously and looked at her flock. "You see real good people often treat those girls there," she nodded towards the crowd, "as if their brains were non-existent as well as their morals, and they entirely and altogether forget their sense of humour, which is a thing to be most carefully considered, I find. It is simply awful when they laugh at you."

"Do they laugh at you?"

"Yes," she said, "and at you; but parish magazines make them wittier than any other—what would you call them?—*means of grace*. Mr. Colclough, think your trick out, will

you ?—although you deserve to do it wrong. I have been waiting to see what those three girls mean to do. See ! do you notice them ? The fist of one is clenched, ready for action. I hope you'll like my voice ; I'm anxious to do justice to my grandmother. Oh!"

She darted into the knot of mutineers, and was lost to them.

"Yes," said Colclough, after a pause, "I should like her to know Miss Weston."

"I should have liked Rica to know her long ago."

"After that, I suppose," thought Colclough, "I may hold my tongue. No doubt he's a fool. So might, for that matter, another man be, if he was not due elsewhere—or incapacitated. I suppose that fellow, now, never had an ache in his life—lucky beggar!"

"The eternal feminine is getting too big for this room," said Frank. "There's a new atmosphere altogether since the Eastern princess came in. Doesn't it strike you, by the way, that she's a spook, not a woman ? How many bodies do you suppose she's rioted into the grave ? The soul in her is as old as Time. She has sat many a time on the roof-tops of Babylon, and seen libations poured and blood shed in her honour, and would again if she had the chance. Civilisation has done precious little for that type. It will be archaic till the knell of doom. Look at the eternal gloom in her eyes!"

"She's a baleful person. I shall take refuge under the old woman's wing. I don't feel as if I can hold out much longer without the moral support of a pipe."

"Hullo! she's going to sing; she's squared in with the young people in the corner. Without notes, you perceive. I believe she saw you meant turning over for her, and did it for your good. Pity if she lets the reforming spirit spread to our side—better keep it on her own. It's all wanted there. Must give her a hint on the subject."

"Shut up and listen."

She understood her accessories; her piano seemed to have been created for her voice. For a minute there was a trace

of nervousness in her singing. This annoyed her; she had the true artist's respect for her own gift, and would no more do injustice to it than she would to any other person's. She stopped for an instant, and began again.

This time she satisfied herself, and she sang on joyously, song, ballad, or hymn, just as they asked for them. In a minute's halt for a rest, Colclough left Mrs. Bent's chair and waylaid Frank, who was going over to the piano.

"Let her rest, man, and give us more of it. She'd be the fortune of an operatic manager."

"No, she wouldn't; she'd clear out the house in a fortnight, and ruin the manager. She'd let loose altogether too many secrets, and make us all too beastly uncomfortable. I could confess myself, this minute, even the sins I only meant to commit. Just watch them, even the old woman."

"Oh Lord! do you see the Spook? I hope that next song will exorcise that devil, or some judgment will be dropping in on the room."

"We'll escape, any how," said Frank. "The loss of a smoke till this time of night is surely punishment enough for any ordinary day's sin."

Margaret began again, a soft low croon. Her master had found it in manuscript in an old farm-house in the Highlands. It was a low, sad, ghostly sort of wail, that slid into one's soul and made a man believe in anything but in himself.

"It's next to cruel," Colclough muttered; "she's young still, and kittenish, or she wouldn't play with heart-strings in this wholesale fashion."

Mrs. Bent wept under the shade of her trembling hand in the silent, solemn manner of the aged, and thought of the spring of her youth.

Several girls looked dry-eyed out before them, seeing more than they bargained for. Two of them turned their backs on their neighbours and their shoulders heaved. Some gave covert vicious digs and kicks to any one that came handy, and Poll roared behind the door and wished

she was dead. But the Spook sat immovable, with strange eyes.

Frank saw her, and a sudden big pity sprang up in him. By some inexplicable impulse, he went and stood by the ottoman on which she sat till the song was over. It seemed to him as if nothing had ever hurt him quite so much as the girl's face; his own pain perplexed him, and he felt an odd respect for it. He knew it was no fleeting sentiment or mere personal pity, but some great age-echo that was re-awaking in his soul. Gradually the truth came to him. It was an echo of Christ's vicarious suffering on the cross for the sin of all time that moved him. And it is an experience which is but rarely vouchsafed to parsons.

Margaret turned round, and looked curiously about the room with an expression on her mouth years too old for it. It annoyed Colclough; it seemed to him hardly fair to turn every one else inside out and to keep herself so comfortably cool.

Frank's look surprised her a little, and it puzzled her. She turned to the piano again and wondered why men always brought mysteries in their wake. Then she sang a little pleasant tune with a savour of herbs and healing properties about it; but she suddenly broke off.

"I've sung too much," she said. "Now, Mr. Weston, are you ready? Here's a choice of songs."

"Had you to go on till you stopped?"

"Yes, I believe it's a sort of mania that possesses me. I feel enchanted with my own voice,—which is, I suppose, conceit, but it's also truth. I'm only a puppet and the song drives me—not I it. It's a possession, perhaps, like the dancing dervishes, or the Malay running amuck. I don't at all believe music's heaven-born; if it is it mixes up good and evil in the most extraordinary way."

He wished vaguely he could tell her the effect of her singing on him, but that was an experience to be shared with no one.

"Doesn't it take it out of you?" he asked, pretending to look for songs.

of [illegible] es, it mak[illegible]er singing. This a[illegible] a song yet ?"

On the whole, he [illegible] she would to any [illegible] hearers think toleran[illegible] began again. [illegible] one can be a parson after [illegible] and sh[illegible] chose nice, blood-thirsty, off[illegible] asked fo[illegible] cheered them up and made them [illegible] Bent[illegible] than they had just lately been doing.

[illegible] me feel idiotic—but haven't you found [illegible] acquitted himself well, and made his [illegible] dy of his profession, and admit that [illegible] all and not quite a born ass. He [illegible] hand soldiers' songs, that [illegible] fancy" themselves more [illegible] no.

[illegible] e'd

[illegible] fort

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHILE Weston was singing, Margaret sat for a few minutes on the arm of Mrs. Bent's chair, giving her some mute comfort; then she went and sat by the Spook, whom the singing clearly was irritating. She was watching Frank's back disagreeably.

"Jack among the maids," she murmured, turning to look at Margaret. "I suppose in time they get used to their positions. Mothers' meetings, Bible classes to young women, and so on break them in. But even when I myself floated gaily in a clerical circle, that part of the business struck me as rather sickening."

"Considering everything," Margaret said softly, "I think the two here to-night have done remarkably well. When I asked them I never thought how easily their situation might be made ridiculous, and when suddenly the fact came upon me, I felt awful. I consoled myself directly though. Neither of those men will make himself look foolish in a hurry, whatever he may make other people."

"I suppose it's being generally successful that gives one that sort of assurance," went on Margaret, with a nervous fear of personalities. "If you're a failure at all, you must be constantly feeling yourself and letting other people find out what you're at."

"In this case," said Miss Brett serenely, "it's a man's nose which is plain-spoken and sniffs at the world, and the world takes its own valuation of itself. Shear it off now——"

"Oh," said Margaret, "that's enough."

Miss Brett laughed softly.

"Ah well," she said, "we'll leave the nose; a parson's

individuality always rests on such a slender thread it would be a pity to snap it and pitch him back among the herd."

She was silent a minute, and Margaret devoutly hoped she would keep so; if she meant to speak she knew quite well all that she could do would be to give her her head, and put up with the rudeness. She felt a weak desire to fly, and stirred with that intention, but the other stopped her by suddenly looking curiously into her face and beginning to speak in a low, soft, contained voice.

"Go back," she said, "you poor foolish baby, go back from whence you came; you have no business here; go and enjoy yourself, and laugh and play about with your kind and be loved—by someone else; there's more than one man in the world—and leave these to work out their own destiny. You'll alter nothing and advance nothing. When he has finished singing I shall sing, and show you how long their order of impressions lasts, and what they're worth. Just now you made them feel like spring onions; that excellent clergyman there is making them ready to swear that he and all his kind are the nicest, kindliest, most thoughtful creatures in creation, and altogether improving to their mind. Presently I——well, wait and see. You're twenty-five this minute—in three years you will be faded."

Margaret begged her to stop and to listen to the music, but she went on coolly :—

"Your taste permanently destroyed by the smell of tripe and onions, and the sound of bad grammar. You're beginning at the wrong end. Go home and fulfil your destiny, cultivate the domestic virtues, and marry, and bring nice wholesome babies into the world, and make good wise men and women of them,—but be careful about the wisdom, it's the first thing. Goodness without wisdom is, I assure you, not worth a grain." Margaret turned to stop her, but she laughed and went on, in a softer, gentler voice : "My advice, I assure you, is based on knowledge and is good. Go home and leave them"—she waved her little brown hand towards the others—"to be swept to their own place. Oh, *you little fool,*" she whispered mockingly, "I've scared you,

have I? Well, never mind. You're a really, nice, dear, sweet little dream, and I'm glad I've come across you. It's a funny experience—for both of us, I fancy."

Margaret was so absolutely thunderstruck at this outbreak and the extraordinary look on the girl's face, that she lost her head completely and stared at her gasping. The Spook had never before betrayed a spark of personal interest in her; she had kept herself as aloof from her—only in a different way—as she had from the others. Even the insolence of her speech hardly struck Margaret, her consternation was altogether too great to think of details. She felt blurred, indistinct, the half-blotted-out remains of a girl; she pulled herself a little together, and stood up.

"Will you sing now?" she said, rather lamely, miserably aware that every eye in the room was raking her, and that they were dying to know what was up.

For the minute she could have turned and rent the whole crowd; it was hideous to be reminded in this way of her impotence, her audacity in daring to throw her puny strength in the teeth of the gods. The Spook stood up in a languid way, with a soft, amused chuckle, and threw a sweeping, leisurely glance about the room.

"I am to sing then, am I?" she drawled in her slow sweet voice. "But it's so long since I sang to an assembly as correct as this, that I feel embarrassed. I must think a little."

She waved one little hand towards a chattering group, while with the other she touched the notes and produced little low, cooing sounds. There was a mutter among the damsels, and one of them, with a strong overblown face, sprang forward and made for her unaffectedly with a pointed pair of scissors.

Mrs. Bent rose with trembling knees; Poll grew as pale as she could in the time, and the men waited and watched. Margaret felt a guilty conviction that her own cowardice was having a demoralising effect. She clutched the champion nimbly and made her put the scissors down on the table.

"As to you, Miss Brett," she said, "you're altogether inexcusable, as you are Mrs. Bent's guest and mine."

Miss Brett was leaning lazily against the piano with her hands behind her, watching Margaret with critical interest and wondering how the men liked it. Margaret felt miserable and baffled; she had, besides, a horrible suspicion that she was undergoing reformation herself at the Spook's hands, and being experimented upon for her good. She deposited the other girl in a seat near Colclough, seized again on her courage, and told Miss Brett in a creditably steady voice that if she would sing she would let her off and look upon it as an apology. It was a neat, small stroke of ingenuity, and amused Miss Brett. She gave a little gurgly laugh.

"I shall sing, of course," she explained gently, "I was only anxious to make a proper selection—merely considering 'weaker brethren.' Unfortunately," she went on artlessly, "our best actions are so liable to misconstruction."

After a benevolent glance round and a tired shrug, she began to sing.

"Just listen," said Margaret to one of the more violent of the girls a minute later, "and stop thumping. Mrs. Bent and I have the same right to swear and rave."

"Look 'ere, lidy, the devil hisself is a fool to 'er, if you knew——"

"But I don't want to. Stop and listen at once."

She was herself listening, in eager, intense excitement. The girl's voice was like her face—superb, serene, terrible. In a minute more every one in the room was listening motionless. The eyes of the girls dilated gradually, their lips grew loose and greedy, their breathing came thick. Her voice grew in strength and swiftness. It was as the sound of rushing waters; it rose to ecstasy, it melted to soft kisses, it flashed with lithe flames. The girls moved, pale and panting, in a languorous rhythm, like ripe corn billowing to a hot blast.

Margaret, half dazed herself, shuddered as she saw them, *and felt their* scorching breath on her. Weston had moved

from his seat, and was leaning against the chimney-piece and watching Margaret. She was white, her mouth was sombre with anxiety, and there was a young look of entreaty about her that was touching.

Frank forgot his scheme and her in connection with it; he just thought of her as a young, frail, foolish creature, a poor little forlorn hope tottering on the brink of the hideous gulf of necessity to stretch out futile hands to its victims.

"The woman's cursed voice is demoralising me," he thought angrily, giving himself a shake; and then he looked again at Margaret, and saw clearer this time—or thought he did so. She seemed to him now to be the embodiment of all the purity of the women of all ages,—the purity born of knowledge, not of ignorance, which is higher than Heaven, whiter than light, and which alone shall last while ages endure.

This rendering of the position pleased him better. On the strength of it, he got himself quite outside the singer's thrall, and a gleam of professional disapproval appeared in his eyes.

Colclough looked angrily from the woman to Margaret.

"It's a voice to make fiends of women," he said to himself, "and to rob men of their souls. I wish she'd dry up."

But the singer went on triumphantly, moving her poor puppets to a dance which is a riddle, which is as grey as the world, and is immortal.

As she sang, she looked round the room from time to time. Suddenly she stopped and laughed aloud. Then she walked over to Margaret.

"I told you I too would show my power," she murmured softly; "now you can restore the balance, and I should advise you to do it."

Margaret's eyelids were drooping heavily, and she felt faint and frightened. She saw that some ugly scene was upon them, and that she herself could best stop it. She went almost mechanically to the piano and began to sing—tender, merry, old-fashioned songs; and as soon as she herself felt better, she took furtive glances round, and found

practical confirmation of Miss Brett's words as to the value and variety of her guests' impressions.

Gradually their cheeks cooled, their fierce mouths closed, their bold eyes sank half ashamed of having blabbed their secrets. In a few, the scorched-up tears burst out afresh, and better memories gave place to the late unhealthy excitement.

It was all very hopeless. Margaret gave a miserable little shiver, and a new pathos came into her young voice, and touched new chords in her emotional hearers. The smell of home-baked bread struck the nostrils of one, the scent of fresh cut peat another, the wail of a curlew was distinct to the ears of a third, and the little seventeen-year-old girl seemed to taste blackberries, and blubbered aloud.

And outside in the night a little thing was leaning up against the door, listening and astonished. She was one of those small fragile creatures, who never seem to grow up, or to take woman's shape upon them.

Margaret stopped singing, and broke gently into a twinkling, radiant little jig that set every heart in the room dancing. Then she stood up.

"You've restored the balance," whispered Miss Brett; "now I shall again try my hand."

"You will not," said Margaret: "you're not a coward, and you do happen to be a lady. Besides, it would be so supremely silly, as I am already quite aware of your power. I am so tired. If you would go, the others would follow."

Miss Brett looked at her, and reflected that after all it wasn't much of an audience to play to; besides—she wasn't quite sure for the moment what the besides meant.

While Margaret got slowly rid of her guests, Frank occupied himself in collecting Mrs. Bent's scattered wits for her.

"Oh, sir," she whispered, as soon as she got better, "you'll side with me now, won't you? Is it right she should wear out her young life like this? and for what?"

"For the glory of God and of women," said Frank cheerfully. "It's a fine struggle, even if it is more or less vain and futile, and it does one good to watch it."

"But, sir, I'm thinking of my young lady."

"Your young lady, even if she's all wrong, which I decline to admit, is getting a training which will better the world till the end of time."

"Mrs. Bent," put in Colclough, "I quite agree with you. I think your young lady is all wrong, just as wrong as Mr. Weston happens to be. I consider both their schemes and their ideas absolutely unworkable, and that they must end in bitterness and smoke. I agree with you absolutely in your most sensible conception of a young lady's duty, which is to keep well within her own track and to mind her own business; but we can't all think alike on these matters, and if a woman does step out into an unknown wilderness, however foolishly, but with an honest, unselfish purpose to do good, she has done her bit of good, and every living man and every man-child yet unborn will be the better—even for her failure."

Possibly the events of the evening were having their effect on Colclough; he knew he was very mixed, and that he had mystified his audience, but he was altogether too tired to retrieve himself.

Mrs. Bent looked at him in a scared way. "God grant it, God grant it!" she repeated, wishing simply that she quite knew what he meant, or what she wanted "Him" to grant.

Margaret came back at last.

"Mr. Weston," she said, as she was saying good-night to him, "after what you have seen to-night you surely don't want to pitch nice, light-hearted, ignorant girls, who have homes, into anything of this sort? You'll allow it's impossible, won't you?"

"I shall allow nothing until I have seen more. I should certainly say the personal results on yourself justify my scheme."

She looked tiredly at him.

"You don't know what you're speaking about," she said gently. "Good-night."

CHAPTER XXX.

ALTHOUGH Rica, having fallen out badly with herself at the time, and had hailed Mrs. Hyde's invitation and the election with glee, when she came to think of it at close quarters she was rather doubtful as to the time she was going to have. If she could not succeed in breaking into Beatrice's crust, and getting a proper grip of her reality, it would certainly pall to stand about and watch from the outside, for an indefinite period, the independent action of two uncomfortable lives. She knew quite well that a tragedy of the cold, classical, well-bred order was playing itself out in that correct household. No one would be down this time of year, and the position of solitary spectator did not promise gaiety. Moreover, Rica did not consider that her proper place was to stand altogether out in the cold.

Hyde himself was of course altogether too much of a gentleman, now that he had ordered himself, and had decided to serve necessity and forego the consolations of the devil, to furnish clues;—she being a girl of whom he was very fond, but with whom he could under no circumstances ever fall in love.

But it was otherwise with Beatrice; this variety of honour is less stringent in women's cases. Beatrice had a right to reveal herself in a measure to another girl, and Rica felt justified of her discontent, and robbed of her rights. One expects at least some concessions to usualness on the part of one's own kind.

As she drove down the Manor avenue, she was chiefly occupied in taking notice of the fine bold sweep of hill and woodland, and wondering that she had never before noticed

the charm of a tracery of bare twigs and branches against a pale spring sky. As she neared the house she began to think on more personal matters, and decided that these frozen star women must have a shocking bad time of it.

"I wonder," she said to herself, "if she ever goes near that baby's grave, or if she ever planted flowers on it, or did any one womanish silly thing with regard to it? I'm certain she never did. It's just a little lonely green mound without a speck of white about it, and it's just like that in her heart. They have no imagination, these women; and they're unpractical; they have nothing to break the shock of life. Thank God for being commonplace! All the same, I hope I'm not going to make myself into a fool. That dead baby and its mother's face that day at lunch have got into my head. And there she is on the steps in a silvery sort of frock, and two peacocks on the terrace to give the colour-note. She surely must be happy just this minute, or she's not human."

Rica found that Beatrice had already started on the canvassing war-path, and the contained, concentrated excitement of the woman mystified her.

"But after all," said Rica, when she came down to tea, and had chosen the most comfortable chair she could see, "if he doesn't get in this time he will the next. It's his ultimate destination, of course; he has all the needful equipments—brains, leisure, money, and an infinite capacity for harrying his kind, if it goes against his convictions, for the time being. There's no mortal reason you should get thin over it, as you're doing."

"He shall get in this time," said Beatrice slowly.

Rica glanced curiously at her. "It's a matter of life and death then, it seems. What on earth's the reason?" she thought.

"There would be no difficulty at all," Beatrice went on earnestly, "but that he refuses to pledge himself to any one definite thing. An idler has no political conscience till it's had its training, he informs them on all possible occasions."

"He says it plump out, does he?"

"In the plainest possible language. He will promise nothing, he says, till he sees light and finds his bearings."

"But wouldn't it be better if he were to find them, more or less, before he enters Parliament?"

"No, he says it's better to get your training inside the House, with plenty of experts and shocking examples at hand to teach you wisdom. Outside, we're all pretty much in the same boat as far as experience goes."

"You're quoting?"

"Oh yes—of course; these were his very words. Then he tells them plainly that he refuses to accept their conclusions, or represent their opinions. He doesn't consider that they have any worth the name, any more than he himself has. He intends, therefore, to confine himself to representing their conscience, and this, in the natural man, being a fluid entity, he feels himself justified in the attempt."

"What do his putative constituents say to this edifying political creed?" said Rica, watching the uneasy serious face.

"Oh, it amuses them at the time. It is a new sort of joke, and they like it. But as soon as they get home, and turn it over in their minds, they begin to think that Geoffrey has been making a fool of them; and when that aspect of the affair occurs to them they frequently abuse their wives. There have been quite shocking scenes in the village of late. I am getting to know quite a good deal about poor people. Is this not a strange outcome of political speeches?"

Rica laughed. "It's the natural outcome of such speeches as those. I should think they're quite too stimulating for Arcadia. If I were an Arcadian, I should also abuse my wife."

"Oh," said Beatrice anxiously, "you surely would not——"

"I surely would—if I didn't beat her! I should feel stirred up, you see, and ready for anything calculated to

reform the species; and, naturally, the first person one thinks of as requiring urgent reformation is one's wife or husband. On the contrary, *you* would naturally make for the Free Library, and read up the subject."

"I would," Beatrice said simply. "I should have thought it the first thing to occur to any reasonable person in perplexity. I brought down with me a great many new books bearing on political subjects. I go in to the library every day, and find that not one of them has been opened."

"Nor will be till all need for the special information is at an end. Don't you see, if one is all simmering up with rampant party-feeling and virtuous exaltation, and is generally a chaotic quantity, he can't sit doggedly down to read and digest his reading, and further to muddle himself? Your people have quite enough to upset themselves with Mr. Hyde's crude slabs of truth, without resorting to books. Here he is, looking as cool as if he hadn't been going about like a roaring sledge-hammer, stirring up the brute beast in his tenants.

"Mrs. Hyde has been giving me your programme," said Rica, as soon as the greetings were over, "and I don't intend to accept it without amendments. I have some sense of humour, if your electors have none."

"So long as you don't expect me to say that I believe in myself, still less in the electors, or in any cause, I'm ready to swear to anything."

"Do you believe in the authenticity of the Four Gospels?"

"No, but I believe in germs."

"You also believe in unadulterated whiskey, don't you?"

"Naturally."

"Ah, that will touch the minds of the masses. My canvassing programme is now complete; one must have a basis, the rest comes with experience."

Beatrice looked at them in half-envious astonishment. If she could only bring herself to approve of it, how delicious a thing light-mindedness might seem! She looked

sombrely out at the moat waters, and the lily leaves unfurling in the spring sun. Those two were as honourable and straight as she was, and as bent on duty, yet they could make merry. Her husband's irritating refusal to humour his electors, or to assume any fraction of knowledge or power he had not put to the test of experience, was done from as stern a sense of duty as her own; he was ready to sacrifice ambition and position for an idea, yet he could make a joke of it all. His life was as bitter a failure as hers; his heart ached as bitterly, yet he could suffer gaily.

In every grown man and woman there is a heart, and in that heart there is a grave—that goes without saying; and yet all men, and some women, can laugh and amuse themselves, and play flower-balls with life: why should she alone sit for ever and watch her open graves? She brought her eyes slowly back from the lily leaves to her husband's face.

"You know I haven't a chance, don't you?" he said to Rica, wondering what on earth Beatrice was looking like that for.

Her eager, absorbed face also mystified Rica, but it touched her, and inspired her with an odd prophetic instinct.

"You'll get in all right," she said, looking from one to the other of them, "not from your own deserts, or from your electors' clear-headedness, but from Mrs. Hyde's sublime faith in you, and in the task she's undertaken. It's of the quality that removes mountains. I saw the same sort once before. It's a shock to find that sort of thing happening to one twice in a life-time; it calls for more tea to steady one's nerves."

There was the faintest echo of a flush in Beatrice's cheeks as she poured out the tea, but her lips looked severe and cold, and a trifle prim. They had got into a reflex way of falling into this attitude whenever they wanted to stop a tremble.

"Jim Colclough's coming next week," said Hyde, rather uncomfortably.

He would have liked awfully to say some nice pleasant

thing to Beatrice. Rica's impulsive speech had touched him, but that set of her lips put him off.

"Ah! you must have his programme ready—he may demand a less simple one than mine."

"He may, but whether he'll get it or not is another matter."

"And now, Miss Weston, shall we go out, or are you too tired?" Beatrice asked. "They will be all at home for tea if we go soon."

"I'm not at all tired. I mean to go round with you for several days, and just get my cues."

"You shall do exactly as you like; but you know infinitely more of men and women and things than I do. My vision is limited beyond your conception. I grow confused," she added, with a little laugh, "unless I can look straight along a line."

Hyde looked thoughtfully after her.

"That's exactly it!" he said to himself, "and that's what's playing hell with both of us. She's too absolutely straight and single-minded to answer to the demands of any one who sees side-lights on things. When did the fact of her limits occur to her, I wonder? She said that for my benefit, and I'm afraid the confession hurt her horribly. How cruel a fellow is, in spite of himself!" He went over to get some matches from the chimney-piece. "Upon my word, I shall do my best to keep moot questions at bay, and get in on jabber, just to please her. The worst is, some of them are so extraordinarily cute and cocky; they may want to see behind the words, which on occasions might be embarrassing."

He went out to a meeting at a little pub. a few miles off, and gained a whole handful of votes, and lost another by the good-tempered, sensible way in which he rated them all round, for some expression of what seemed to him false sentiment on the part of one of his committee.

On the homeward ride he was chiefly occupied in wondering why Beatrice had taken up this election with such extraordinary keenness.

"It's a matter of such enormous seriousness to her," he

thought. "Her fearful truthfulness comes against her always; she can't assume anything—even a touch of flippancy; and I believe the thought of that poor dead child torments her continually."

Rica, meanwhile, was watching her companion in and out among the cottages of the labourers, and the shops of the tradespeople, with an astonishment that often nearly gasped aloud. The calm, direct methods she adopted; her absolute freedom from an atom of cajolery, her straightforward, quite uncompromising answers to ticklish questions, that would have been damning in any one else, gained for her a hearing and a success that were amazing.

Not a man or a woman on the estate, or in the neighbourhood, but recognised the perfect truth in the handsome cold woman, who held herself so unconsciously but absolutely above them, and who had a great deal too much respect for herself and for them to make any attempt at standing on their level, or in pretending to understand their lives. She could not do it to save her own, and she did not try to—a fact which every one of them recognised at once. In a dim way they also understood this simple code of honour, and it pleased them, and made them think gently of themselves.

Her straightforward faith in her husband's ability to do anything he wanted to also pleased them, and impressed them, especially as they were all quite aware that there had been a "story," and that the blame lay with him altogether.

Her conduct with regard to the children question touched Rica. She took slight, gentle, well-bred notice of any children brought forward prominently; but she let slip countless opportunities that the ordinary feminine canvasser would have seized on greedily. Children were indifferent creatures to be passed with a kind word; her business lay elsewhere, and there was so little time.

But, in one poor little cottage, Beatrice heard a sick baby moaning in its cradle. She clean forgot the election for an entire minute, stooped down, and took the child softly to her arms. Rica watched her in the dim light, and she felt cold to the bone.

"The baby isn't in its little grave at all," she thought; "it's lying there in her heart. As soon as ever I leave this house I shall call her 'Beatrice,' and she shall call me 'Rica,' and we shall be real flesh-and-blood friends."

Mrs. Hyde never went into a house but she left a little hush behind her, and in the hush there was reverence and a little awe.

They did a tremendous afternoon's work. Even Rica felt rather worn out when they got home, and came into the lighted hall. Beatrice was ghastly, and Rica noticed that she tottered as they reached the head of the stairs.

She came down to dinner, however, looking calm and serene, with a little delicate colour in her cheeks, and her eyes were brilliant.

CHAPTER XXXI.

COLCLOUGH came down a few days after Margaret's supper, with a frightful cold which he had caught the night of it. The reason he came was to take observations on Rica Weston; this he feebly confessed to himself; he confessed just as feebly that he was acting altogether against his conscience, and was a poor creature for doing it. Hitherto he had steered carefully clear of love, having suffered severely in his time from outbreaks of it on the part of other people, and having got into awful scrapes in consequence. His magistracy in India had carried him into divers parts, where men were scarce and women pretty, and idleness the day's rule.

From his very first meeting with her he had been attracted by Rica Weston, and he had a general inward certainty that he could make the attraction mutual if he put out his full strength, having had quite embarrassing successes without putting out any strength at all. Besides, men are constitutionally given to make too sure.

Marrying, moreover, was not, as things stood, for the like of him. India had fairly done for him, so some dozens of doctors had assured him; and it seemed a shabby, inadequate thing to offer to a sound, wholesome, fresh creature like Rica the mere remains of a man,—to ask her, so to speak, to marry a cough.

He had no business to come and stay in the house with her, of course, but he could keep the consequences strictly to himself, for, he flattered himself, with a grin, he was an excellent hand at making himself obnoxious, and had done so more than once with great glory when the occasion arose.

He had been round all the morning canvassing with Hyde, and had been swearing softly at the result since lunch, while Geoffrey listened cheerfully and smoked three cigarettes. When Colclough pulled up to cough he was rolling a fresh one.

"You don't think I'll get in?" he said, during Jim's rest after a spasm. "I'm not so sure myself—my wife has half the county by the heels; and I ask so precious little of the fellows," he went on lazily,—"just the chance to get experience enough to spoonfeed a political conscience. Directly the thing kicks and feels its feet they won't find any cause to complain of its bashfulness. After all, when you come to think of it, there's hardly a fellow in my position in England who has any more right to speak definitely than I have, or to promise more. One doesn't pass political exams. at Eton, or trouble particularly with history, nor does it ever enter into the heart of boy to apply classical lore. You know yourself the worth of a political training at the universities—makes politicians about as much as the Newdigate prize makes poets. As to the traditions of one's house, in these times the boy may be his own father, but he's not, as a rule, his father's son."

"More's the pity."

"No doubt. But what I want to ask is why you're in such a devil of a hurry to crush my young enthusiasm at the start. I have ten more speeches to make this week, and it would be a pity to use up all your adjectives the first day. There will be no end of swearing to be done by you before I've finished. Reserve your forces. How's Frank Weston getting on?"

"In a nice eruptive youthful way."

"I can't grasp the fellow as a curate. At Christ's he was a good fellow, 'a mere man and brother.'"

"So he is now. He says the great advantage of the Church is that you can do as you darn please in it. It's the one profession you can have a free hand in, and a secured audience to swear at evenly all round without injuring your prospects."

"But bishops and vicars and things of that order?" suggested Hyde, half opening his eyes.

"They're nothing if you know how to work 'em, Frank assures me. A parson can put conventions in his pocket and keep his character if he's not a born ass."

"There must be a good many born asses about in that case."

"They haven't got the right grip on their privileges, that's all. The clerical conscience wants putting into hard condition, dropping the dual nature, and returning to the masculine gender."

"There's too much of the Delilah-lap and the cheap martyr about the business it seems to me."

"Just so."

"They were better men when they burnt them," said Hyde, carefully brushing off a pinch of ashes that had fallen on his dog's head.

"And provided entertainment of a more bracing order for the laity," said Colclough gently. "Well, Frank's steered clear of all the old pitfails," he said presently; "but he's just about to step into one of his own making."

"What?"

"A woman, of course."

"But I thought he had cleared the pitfalls?"

"She isn't a pitfall; she's an original."

"They all are, aren't they, with variations?" said Hyde simply.

"Ah, but she's different altogether."

"Go on; it's getting interesting."

"I don't think I will," Colclough said slowly, "till I know more about her. She's a good woman—one doesn't want to talk at random about her."

"What about this reforming craze of his?"

"It's madness, of course. He's beginning at the wrong end. If a man knows men as well as Frank does, he shouldn't attack mountains."

"He may collect some fresh side-lights."

"That goes without saying. He'll return to his kind with

new material enough to force them into thinking. He's a cheerful, sane person, and they'll believe him too, more or less. Besides, you see, he's a fine animal himself, and has an understanding of the ways of 'such.' Another thing, he'd as soon hurt a woman as torture a child, and has a great horror of both crimes; yet he can understand how lots of fellows have got into the way of being careless about the one thing, while they would knock you down if you so much as suggested that they were capable of the other."

"It's anything but a nice thing to hurt a woman," said Hyde, with a dash of memory in his voice.

Colclough was sorry. He felt a little old-maidenly, as if he had been pointing a moral, whereas he had altogether forgotten the personality of his audience. Geoffrey jumped up and stretched himself.

"I must go," he said; "it's four o'clock; I'm late as it is."

Colclough was coughing again badly.

"I say, Jim, have some brandy when it's over. Do you often go on like this? Is it all lungs?"

"Lungs, liver, spleen, and general disintegration of the organs,—all in precisely the same condition as your politics."

"Shows how much you know about it. Your organs are worn out, whereas my politics are in the course of making."

"Go and get them made then, and leave me to cough in peace."

"All right. You'll find the ladies and tea in the drawing-room, no doubt. Have some brandy before you go in, or medicine, or something."

When he had finished and rested, Colclough went off to look for Rica. It had not yet become necessary, he found, to begin to make himself obnoxious.

It was a cold, false, sunshiny, east-windy day. She was alone in the drawing-room, sitting before the fire in a big chair. She looked placid and consolatory, the very thing for a man half knocked to pieces with a cough. He settled

himself in the next most comfortable chair and stirred the fire tenderly. She looked at him kindly.

"You believe in fire, I perceive," she observed.

"Yes, and in all other things that make the face to shine."

"Ah, you and Frank agree there! There's nothing ascetic about him," she said comfortably.

"There's more perhaps than you think. Frank's not the person to blab out all his fastings. Going without food and ruining your digestion and your temper isn't everything. There are forms of fasting of which the world, being mostly feminine after all, knows nothing."

"For such a ghastly-looking creature," she thought, watching him pleasantly, "he's a restful person to talk to."

"There's a distinct draught where you're sitting," she said in her motherly way; "move your chair just an atom."

He obeyed her, and went on in a lazy, desultory way.

"Common-sense, you see, is the groundwork of Frank, with notable exceptions, of course—as at present. He knows, if he works among unsavory masses, he must keep his body above par, or his soul will sink below it. One can't soar on prayer and cold mutton in these days, life is too real and fast. Never did believe myself in high thinking or an insufficient meat diet."

Rica pulled a letter out of her pocket and fingered it absently.

"He doesn't think much of Frank's experiment then," she thought. "This letter is perplexing. Who is the girl? He slurs her over too much for wholesomeness and practical purposes." She looked at Colclough doubtfully, but the doubt cleared off presently.

"What do you think of Frank's present crusade?" she asked abruptly.

"It's mad, of course," he said slowly, "but it's excellent experience."

"Yes; experience has a nasty trick of making you pay for it."

"In this case that may be where the excellence comes in."

"Probably. To begin with, tell me all you know of this girl."

Colclough's eyes twinkled as he stroked his moustache.

"Your sharpness makes one squirm, Miss Weston. She's a good girl, quite a marvellous girl."

"But," repeated Rica, "who is she?"

"We leave that for you to discover," he said, watching her amusedly; "I haven't a notion. She's perfect in her place, as she would, I fancy, be perfect in any other place. I wish you knew her, Miss Weston."

She looked at him superiorly. "I wish I did," she said drily; "I might then get some sensible suggestion of her."

"She's unique altogether."

"He's not a scrap in love with her," she thought. "Thank goodness, I shall hear it all in time." She fitted her back well into the chair and settled down. "Begin at the beginning," she said. "Tell me the details, and I shall do the generalisation. There seems to be an astonishing amount of uniqueness about the whole affair."

"Don't you think, Miss Weston," he said reflectively, "that there's a deal of the detective in women? Some of the ferret has been forgotten in them, perhaps. It's an animal remains that's evoluted itself into a nice, delicate, searching, and fairly accurate instrument, but a bit dangerous, don't you think? Digs into sore spots, you know, chucks ugly things out of hidden drawers. But it's a fine birthright, and has fine staying powers."

"It's a miserable birthright," she said impatiently, "and nothing but the folly and dense crudity of man makes it necessary to our salvation. Leave the nasty, little, ferrety beast, and tell me all you know of this girl."

"That you may rout out her poor little ewe lamb of a mystery? I may tell you I did my level best to do it, but failed"

"Naturally. Go on."

He told her all he could of Margaret, and as he went on

her eyes widened more and more. He was touching the coals in his gentle interested way all the time. If his eyes had been in their proper place—where there was a girl to look at—he would have been amazed at Rica and at her very unusual state of strong tension.

"What's her name?" she asked suddenly. Her voice brought his eyes from the fire to her face.

"Miss Daintree."

"Oh!" she said in a baffled tone. "Her Christian name?"

"Margaret." He put down the poker, and peered at her. "Upon my word, I believe you've dropped on a spoor."

"Go on—tell me more," she ordered eagerly, and he noticed the hand which lay on her lap was trembling.

He told her all he knew. When he had finished she stood up and gave herself a little shake.

"It's Margaret Dering," she said at last.

"The girl Hyde——"

"Yes. You think she's dead—I don't. Wait—I'll tell you all I know now."

When she had done so he felt pretty certain that she was right.

"I felt sure you'd be able to tell me who she was," he said. "The ferret's an intelligent animal."

"How is it you're not in love with her?" she demanded sharply.

"No need," he thought dejectedly, "to turn on the obnoxious tap just yet."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," he rejoined humbly; "I'll do my best."

"Protected no doubt by some one else," she went on placidly. "Although, for my part, I can't imagine a previous person making any difference when that girl appeared."

"You forgive Geoffrey, then?"

"One has to, under the circumstances. But don't let us speak of that. It was all too cruel, too relentless, and so unnecessary—from one's own point of view. By a little

management every one of them could have had lovely times of it—but—— Then Beatrice is my friend," she went on loyally. "No one is quite like her, in her fine, sedate beauty."

"She's a genuine good woman too," Colclough said gently. He had an unconscious way of lowering his voice whenever he spoke of a good woman. Perhaps it was because he met so many bad ones. "She's been the best friend Geoffrey ever had. With a lesser woman he'd have made an ass of himself in one way or another."

Rica beamed on him indulgently. "You think that, do you? I'm so glad. I have been thinking it too. I wish she knew—I wish——"

She thought she heard a little moarning breath and a soft scuffle of feet. She looked round, but there was no one to be seen.

"I wish almost she did not care for him so uncomfortably for herself! And to think of his not seeing it is so amazing! Men are blind and acquisitive persons. They get all sorts of nice things poured out on them, they absorb them gaily, and go on their way rejoicing."

"Oh, do they?"

"Yes, anyway as far as is made known to the naked eye. Whenever a man trips too, if you notice, there are always women hanging about to help him up and dust him and put salvê on his bruises. On the contrary, women have to pick themselves up, and dust themselves, and even the publicans pass by on the other side. There's Frank trying in his small way to do a little dusting, and the first thing you do is to shoot out the lip and call him an ass."

"My dear Miss Weston! A maniac."

"Ah well, that's a concession to be thankful for. It wants then, it seems, the best part of two women's lives, given ungrudgingly, to save one man's soul alive. The result seems inadequate to the outlay."

Colclough laughed softly into the fire, and the things he didn't say irritated her beyond words. She would gladly have boxed his ears. She was silent for a minute or two,

then she said rapidly, "We must settle up now at once about Margaret."

"No need to tell them here, is there?"

That minute she was herself again, and snubbed him and his sex collectively with her eyebrows before she spoke.

"Hardly. The all-round complication is the point of interest just now. Surely having spoilt two lives, it might have been arranged that she should bless one; and Frank's a good fellow. Not being used to this sort of thing, too, he will be in a horrid tumult, and won't shake together for an untold time. He's a stiff-necked and perverse generation. It's too late in the day to do anything, either. The mischief's done."

"Consider the experience."

"I'm just doing it. No doubt it will soften his angles,—possibly teach him to preach, not as at present to stand aloof and swear, forgetting, as he did last Sunday, that he had put on the surplice belonging to the smallest curate, and that it just touched his armpits.

"Why should you thrust him altogether out of the running and then proceed off-hand to improve the occasion for the poor beggar?" She looked at him softly, frowning as if one had to focus one's sight to see anything so microscopical.

"But—you saw her. Is she the person to sacrifice herself for one man, to be picked up the next minute by another? Besides, the same woman wouldn't love those two men. That's patent enough, surely?"

"Women's fancies aren't always patent. One can sometimes hardly quite account for them."

"Margaret Dering isn't a type," said Rica severely; "she's herself. You're thinking of types."

"Oh, am I?"

"Perhaps you congratulate yourself," she continued, benevolently eyeing him, "that you have escaped a danger. Now women are more adventurous. I should have plunged in regardless of consequences. To be in love with some women must teach a man so many things."

He wished she would keep her clear eyes off him, he wanted to have an uninterrupted laugh. His previous qualms of conscience and heroic resolves to ward her off had become an excellent joke.

"You're coughing again. Surely you're not in a draught there?"

"No, thank you, I'm all right. Women have a way of springing novelties on you, I admit; but whether the derangement they produce in you isn't more than the knowledge they bring along is another matter."

"The moral then is, don't let the derangements be produced. It is possible, I assure you, in the case of most women."

She stood up, and while he was wondering what she was about she had pulled a screen carefully round him. He wished for a minute she wasn't quite so healthy herself, she might then be more sympathetic in a less motherly way. He had an uncomfortable suspicion that she wanted to fatten him, possibly to make him take cod-liver oil—even that she went the length of *hoping* anyway that he wore flannel next his skin.

It was not quite what he wanted of her. However, it made his position altogether tenable.

"Margaret, you see," she began again, "stands out too distinctly, is too solitary to escape herself, or to allow any escape to the men she draws to her. We're not all endowed with a self any more than you are. Half of us are just slices out of one great whole," she continued pleasantly, "as like as one piece of Christmas pudding is to another."

"Oh! Can't imagine myself the joys of making love to a slice. They expect that sort of thing, I conclude?"

"Certainly they do, and they get it. It needs a good deal of experience before you can differentiate them from individuals. You see," she explained, "they're always dropping on answering chords in each other's insides, and so they can compare notes, which makes them genial and companionable. And they're generally cheerful and busy trot-

ting round scouring creation. They haven't a suspicion that their creation is just a little well-trodden maze in a citizen's lot. It's delightful, you see. A slice is never lonely, but always good-tempered, sociable, pleasant, and guileless. They are by far the best wives for the sons of men, just as their counterpart are the best husbands for the daughters of men."

"You've arranged it all neatly. Which do you prefer for yourself?"

"For comfort, the state of being a slice. It takes a god or an individual to be lonely and to make other people properly uncomfortable."

"That's it, is it?" He chuckled delightedly, and began again on the fire.

She looked at him half amused, half angry, then she shrugged her shoulders. "What does it matter after all?" she thought; "they all laugh at us. But not one of them can get on without us."

She took no notice of him, therefore, but began to think of Margaret; then she suddenly put her aside with a little shiver. She could not quite realise it as yet. She wanted just now to get some one definite idea of Frank and his schemes from her companion, and it might be her last opportunity. She was out most of the day with Beatrice, and they were all together in the evenings.

"Look here," she said, "I know Frank's position now pretty nearly as well as I ever shall—from him. People who love women like Margaret don't speak of it much, any more than they do of their dead ideals, or their good deeds, or God. Tell me what you think of his scheme, and why it is madness."

"Because it's a sort of thing you can't work up from—you must work down to; and Frank is wasting his enthusiasm in hoping for results. He would be a power among intelligent men, whereas ignorant women don't understand him. Common-sense and time will do well what he's doing badly."

"It seems the old thing over again. The evil that we

do bears immediate fruit, the good is only visible to our grandchildren."

"Woman all over! You expect too much must see results. Well for us God is masculine, otherwise we should have been long since swept off the face of the earth."

"Men are born of women——"

"Quite so, we have a lot to answer for."

"You have. I wonder you ever get a night's rest."

"I hear Beatrice and the distant music of the tea. I'm so glad! I think we're getting dull."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. BENT was asleep, and so was Poll, which fact was sufficiently audible. Poll did all things heartily, from sinning to snoring.

But Margaret and Caroline Brett were still talking, though the dawn was breaking through the clouds, half cramped by the bitter cold, and casting ghostly shadows on the grey house-tops.

Caroline had come late and had stayed on talking. She had put on her cloak and had begun to go several times, but had sat down again for no quite apparent reason. In the earlier hours she had said strange wild things, and her voice had seemed often to scorch and sear, and had more than once caused Margaret's heart to quiver and cry out within her in its impotent pain.

But in the grim chill of the dawn she hardly said a word. When she did speak there was something in her voice that would have been a sob in another woman. Heat and passion, however intense, must shrink and shiver when the corpse-touch of a sunless daybreak is upon them. Crimes may be done in the touch of these death's fingers, but they must be of the vendetta order, of long standing, and done on principle, and the doer's blood must be of the even-flowing chilled sort; no hot full-blooded strokes ever fell at this hour from any man's hand.

Caroline sat wearily back in a low cane chair, staring indifferently into the dawn; and Margaret watched her as wearily, racking her brain for something to say. She was so utterly fearful of saying the wrong thing that she had *hardly* spoken at all. She was also trying her hardest to

still the echo of the other's low, rich, oppressive monotone of misery which was in her ears, like the sound of the troubled sea in a shell.

"But why," she said at last, "when you have gone the whole round and have grown so deadly sick of it all, when it bores you, when you despise and jeer at the people you live among—why then don't you try the other side of life? It would at least have the advantage of novelty. Anyway, it would only be reasonable to give it a chance."

"Under what conditions? To-morrow, if I were to repent, as you call it, what would happen? Do you think I should be any the better for a wash-tub and regular prayer?"

"No—I think you would probably be the worse. There are other ways of living decently besides washing dirty clothes. You are a strong enough woman to seize on any one of them and to live it better than most other people."

"I am a strong enough woman to die as I have lived—amidst the crash of broken laws," she laughed. "It sounds melodramatic, doesn't it, but you see melodrama is the badge of all my kind. Repentance doesn't appeal to me. I have a distinct admiration for the Egyptian idea that repentance was one of the forty-two deadly sins. By the way, you speak rather glibly, don't you, of my strength, and of my capacity to live out my life creditably and *comfortably*—that last trifle is to be considered by *me*—at any rate? As a matter of fact, if it did occur to me to-morrow to repent, in the whole wide world there would be no pleasant place for me, no rest anywhere that would in any way commend itself to the soles of my feet. There are unfortunately not the makings of a Catholic in me; then it might be otherwise. They manage these things better than we do. They embellish repentance with picturesqueness, and give an air of distinction to it. Here it is dull, and grey, and impossible always. What place or peace does a woman who has even once tripped find ever after, — not to say me? I have thought the matter out, you see, at odd times."

"There are other places besides England," said Margaret; "warm brilliant countries, where you could be happy."

"The world is too small a place to hide a woman's past in. Besides, when you come to consider the matter, I have nothing to repent of. I was pre-ordained for another life, I was made and finished for another life, and fitted with the capacities, and ambitions, and thoughts befitting one. My face and my figure, my all, down to my little pink finger-nails, were all polished and perfected to fit another life. Then I was chucked helpless into an impossible condition. Ah, I see little shreds of philosophy floating about in you, and your conscience is at you to jerk them out, though you know their blatant lies as well as I do. 'Character makes circumstances.' 'Accommodate yourself to your surroundings,'—such precepts are not suited to women's needs, least of all to mine. Other people, you see, are given their lives to live out. I was given—with no choice of mine—another person's, and put in a state of being where it was impossible to get one of the essentials to live the life given me."

"It seems to me," said Margaret, "that you are in a bad muddle."

"It seems to me," said the other, "that I am a bad muddle myself—a frantic joke of whoever created me."

"If I only had sense to explain myself properly," said Margaret, "I could show you that you are talking sheer nonsense. You are bitter and angry and sore with Fate, of course; but still, isn't it a little weak to go wandering off irresponsibly as you are doing? Surely to have to train down daily to your surroundings must be an inexpressible effort, and extremely irritating. It appears to me it is you who are frantic, not God."

"No, I am quite sane. Moreover, I am not evil—which, after all, is a racial distinction—because I love evil. If I had been born in a sphere of life a few pegs higher I should have been a credit to my class, an ornament to society, a fine, arresting, notable woman, with half London at my feet. I should then not have desired evil, I should have *been more* blessed and admirable than any of my fellows.

I should certainly have felt no inclination to drag such glory as mine in the dust. My name would have been handed on, pure and unsullied, to all generations—a name to conjure with!"

"We all dream dreams," said Margaret, following the other girl's eyes out into the morning grey, "and we are always good in them."

"You are mistaken. You can exactly gauge a woman's possibilities for good by her dreams. I could tell you one of your dreams this minute, plot and motive; you might make a shot at the plot of mine, but you would hopelessly confuse the motive. I never said I should have been a good woman, as the goodness of convention and commerce goes, but I should have been a superb, notable woman, with a reputation, which is a quite different matter. I once knew a man who had a craze for Renan. He was always reading aloud. One sentence struck me. 'Dieu m'a trahi,' Renan observes in his candid, Frenchy way, deploring his free thought, which would in the Protestant community have been mere intelligent broad thought. The words seem to touch my case to a T."

She went over to the window and began to play a soft little tune on the pane. Suddenly the words of it began to echo in her ears; she gave a short angry laugh, and wheeled round on Margaret, who was quite too worn out to break the silence.

"Should you pick me out at a glance as a clergyman's daughter?" she asked.

"No, decidedly I should not," said Margaret, with a sudden laugh, which Caroline echoed grimly.

"Ah, you see, I'm not a clergyman-daughtery sort of person, and it's rather a pity, perhaps. I was a hawk or other bird of prey among barn-door fowl, and I couldn't stand them at any price. When I was even ever so little a child I used to have to rush to the garret or behind the dust-heap, my two cities of refuge, time after time, to press my hands against my heart to stop the actual pain in it when I wanted things I couldn't get—quite justifiable, every-day

things in another life. My very soul needed light, and beauty, and breath, and warmth to keep it alive, and there was I cast into the middle of a sordid, ugly Welsh village, hemmed in by bleak mountains on one side and wind-blown seas on the other, and I craving for burning suns and brilliant skies, and the golden glories and the scents and sounds of my dreams."

She shivered, and drew her cloak closer round her. Margaret stirred the smouldering dawn-cold fire.

"Come and sit here," she said; "I can hear you so much better."

She came over, huddled down into a chair, and went on in a low, soft, monotonous voice,—

"My father was an uninteresting person. When he was not teaching us—he did that well, I will say—he was engaged in coercing the thieving bodies and souls of his parishoners into something resembling decency; and the ways and means to this end were the current topics of conversation in our household. The discussion of commonplace vice is a most wearisome thing, but it was the leaven of my father's life; it seemed to stir the monotony of his flat pool. But heavens, to live in the thick of it! His face used to pucker up with spite as he deplored the sin and heaped platitudes on the sinner. My mother——"

Margaret leaned forward eagerly. She never remembered her own mother, but she always liked to pick up anything she could about other girls'. A mother seemed to her to be so very delightful a possession.

"You scent sentiment," said Caroline with a laugh. "Don't! I have none in connection with my mother. She was good, no doubt, as befitted her station in life, but she was exceedingly dull and dreary, never soaring more than an inch or two above her stocking-basket, if as high as that. She did her day's work with a dogged perseverance that was irritating, it was so like a beast of burthen—a patient ass. She dealt sparingly in the moralities—she was dull, you see—and got confused among them, so she sensibly avoided them. It was her best point. My sisters were excellent

Sunday-school teachers, and designed specially for the *rôle*. They and my mother had, I conclude, some fellowship with one another. They used to discuss parish matters, with their feet—each with a bunion on it—disposed on old hassocks, and mend clothes with a monotonous content. Sometimes I could have killed them, and hid their bunions out of my sight for ever. However, I had to confine myself to spoiling all the sewing entrusted to me."

She looked tiredly into the fire. Margaret would have given worlds to go to bed, but she did her best not to look as she felt.

"I think my mother always felt a subacute sense of guilt at having introduced such an innovation as me into any respectable family. She would sit and look at me with a mild, perplexed protest in her eyes."

"What a place to live in!" said Margaret suddenly. "But how do you account for yourself? You couldn't have dropped into that house without a cause."

"Oh! I heard myself explained one day by my dear parents. I had been forgotten in a dark cupboard, where I was presumably repenting for some crime, and they had retired to their room to commune together. The text they chose was that about the father's sins and I was the shocking example. It seems my grandfather was an Indian Nabob. In his unregenerate days he had married a high-caste Hindoo lady; she was a fine savage, full of fire and venom, but my ancestor, growing pious, proceeded to convert her according to family methods. Conversion proved too much for her; she disgraced him in a variety of ways, and the evil stream—for the express purpose, it seemed, of making good Scripture words—was perpetuated in me. My father seemed quite haughty at the thought of himself being the proud proprietor of a well-authenticated scriptural example. As soon as I descended from my stool of repentance I ran off to the mountains, and hid till starvation brought me back. I was shut up for four days with five sermons to read."

"Weren't you weak and ill from exposure and hunger?"

"Oh yes. Those were carnal afflictions not to be considered. There was, however, a glass in the room, and, as soon as I had polished off the sermons, I betook myself to it. One or two of my father's remarks had sharpened my wits, and I discovered that I had got something from my unholy old grandmother with my sins; and I found it pleasant to watch the brilliant rushes of red to my cheeks, the leaps of light into my eyes. The consciousness of a beauty like mine blazing on you for the first time is a liberal education, and leads quickly to the knowledge of its power. I tingled and quivered and swayed foolishly with the shock. Then, in sheer joy in myself, I began to hum snatches of the old ballads that float in the Welsh air and fill one's ears, and I found I had a voice to match my face. I took off my bodice, and looked at my neck and arms in the mangy old glass, propped against two bricks, and I wondered at the perfection of me. I could hardly bear to cover myself with my badly-cut common clothes; but the bitter cold brought up ugly goose-skin on me, so I had to. I dressed and got warm; but I was silly enough to take off my bodice again just to have one more little look, when the door burst open and my father appeared, and began casually to throw abuse and moralities and verses of Scripture at me. He had been watching me through the keyhole with professional disapproval. When he had come to the end of his 'langwidge' he gave me a stinging stroke across my nice creamy shoulders, and made a horrid black mark, which was worse than the pain. Somehow, after that original sin and its corrections got confused in my mind. I was like tinder, ready for the touchstone; and it came. I have done well since. Life has been good to me. I am rich—and——"

She crouched over the fire, and Margaret waited miserably. Caroline sat up again in a minute or so.

"Do you think I should have been a much better woman if I had stayed in 'our village'? By this time I should have been a faded, discontented old maid, with every natural instinct shrunken and shrivelled."

"It does not follow at all. There are heaps of things

you could have done. Every one now can find some outlet if she wants one."

"For her brain or her hands she can, not for her beauty, or for those desires which are only right and natural for the privileged classes. I had nothing in me by which I could distinguish myself in art or literature, or compel Fate, so to speak, and I had no desire for work; I hated the thought of it as much as half the *good* women of society do. I should, I tell you, have been no whit less immoral than I am now as an old maid in a cramped community of monotonous sordid bodies with choked crêpe-draped souls in them. Then," she went on slowly, "as I grew older, I should have shrunken with shame, and have developed a fresh wrinkle every time I looked at the face of a baby. That is the overflow drop in the bitterness of a woman's defeat; it is also a big factor in her degradation. As many women have been ruined by the lean hungering after a child as by giving birth to one."

Margaret looked fearfully at the woman. She laughed.

"No, I never had a child. I never find any fun in hurting helpless irresponsible things. One of my dreams, by the way, is to get hold of a well-filled crêche. I would feed up the babies; I would give them sweets and fruit and toys; I would fill them up to their chins with joy and laughter, blot out every idea of cold and hunger or discomfort. Their lives should be one warm dream of delight; then," she said, with a soft little hiss, "I would kill them all in their sleep, so sweetly and softly that dying would be the best little bit in the dream."

"But," said Margaret, "from your own showing God is more cruel than man, and yet you trust Him to finish your dream."

"Ah! one keeps always a vague, fond, foolish faith in the unknown, possibly because it is the only belief we have not tried and found wanting.

She brooded gloomily into the fire. Suddenly a great fear leapt into her eyes; she rose quickly, and turned them into the dimness of the dawn. Margaret looked at her, but

she could not find one word to say. Caroline picked up the cloak that had fallen from her shoulders.

"You see now," she said, with a grim laugh, "that I had to work out my own salvation by the only road open to me."

She went to the bed and began to put on her things, as if even that effort were not worth the making. Margaret's lips moved and quivered as she looked out into the dreary street with a face of perplexed misery.

A revelation had been made to her, and it was beyond her dealing with. In that moment she struggled to cast from her the crushing, inexorable, so-reasonable-seeming belief in the injustice of all things on earth and above it that comes to most of us at some moments, and falls like a pall on the hope and trust that keep us distinct from the beasts.

"She has only spoken the truth—God has betrayed her. The ground was cut from under her feet right from the first. What can I say that isn't a lie? I am more foolish than she."

Something touched her. She lifted her tired young face and saw Caroline looking down with a half-smile on her lips.

"You're bursting to deal faithfully with me. Don't—I like you better silent. Your silence brings as much good to me as I can take in. A little goes a long way with me. Don't worry either—it's quite providential you're constitutionally unable to preach."

"Preach!" said Margaret wretchedly,—"I couldn't to save my life. I wish I could. I should feel less of an idiot then."

Caroline laughed. "As soon as you learn that trick you're lost. Can't you see that words won't meet the case of me, or of the like of me? I have whisperings of better things, I assure you, as well as my betters. On the contrary, I have other promptings of which they and you know nothing." She stooped and put her hands heavily on Margaret's shoulders and looked at her. "What made me tell that lie, I wonder?" she said in her soft hiss. "You could

be as bad as any one else, and that's why you are good and have common-sense, I believe. You have forces that bring back the balance—no thanks to you. In me, for instance, there are none—no blame to me——"

"We can make ourselves *not* do things," said Margaret feebly.

Caroline stood up and threw up her hands with a gesture of contempt.

"Speak for yourself; my dear, I am radically out of plumb, and words won't re-model the foundations. You are firmly convinced, no doubt, that God made me. Well, in the internal machinery there's a fundamental flaw for which I am not responsible. Moreover, in other conditions of life this flaw would never in any sort of way have inconvenienced me; it would, in fact, not have been found out, which is the one thing needful for respectability."

She spoke in bitter flippancy, but there was the flickering ghost of a forlorn hope behind her eyes that stirred Margaret strangely.

"I know nothing," she cried at last, "I can see nothing clear. I would give anything in the world to do some tiniest little thing for you, and I can't."

"But you couldn't make Him, Who made me, unpick His workmanship and begin again on a new principle. Never cry over spilt milk, it is wasted energy." She looked curiously at Margaret and laughed harshly. "I wonder what induces me to come night after night into a crowd that smells like a stale Sunday-school just to look at you and hear you sing? It's poor fun, and, as a matter of fact, I hate you. Do you know that?"

"Of course I do; sometimes you take no pains to conceal it. Why do you?"

"Again I refer you to a higher authority. Another screw loose somewhere."

"Caroline, don't go—stay here with me to-night, and for a few days, and we'll go down the river and—and——" She broke off.

Her tired brain could form no more words; there was

some vague notion floating bewilderedly in her that if she could only keep this creature, with her dreadful pessimism and her maddening beauty, she might in some unknown way or another hold her, and hustle her, as it were, into the kingdom of heaven.

"Go to bed," said Caroline, "and get the colour back into your cheeks. What, in God's name, brought you into this sort of thing? If I had been in your place I should have got to heaven some easier way. However, that's neither here nor there. Well, I have made a fool of myself, and you've tired yourself to death. Go to bed, and don't further tire yourself praying for me; it's really of no earthly or heavenly use. I'm not, I tell you, worth a line in your poor little face; and the sooner you go to those you belong amongst, and learn the importance to a woman's salvation of a seamless face, the better. You're losing all womanly morality in this wild-goose chase."

"Don't talk to me any more to-night," said Margaret wearily, standing up. "Please go home if you won't stay with me. I don't think I can tell you quite how sorry I am that you won't stay."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HYDE was enormously sorry for his wife; he felt instinctively that she carried somewhere about her a characteristic, prim tragedy, but the exact plot of it he would have been altogether at a loss even to guess at. He knew the baby came largely into it, and the injury to her pride in connection with Margaret Dering probably had an innings; but if any one had suggested that her miserable, enduring, unsatisfied love for himself had one jot to do with it he would have laughed in his face. One might just as reasonably have suggested that his own particular grievance had anything to do with Beatrice.

He felt very grateful to her just now, and a little touched by her absorbed, serious interest in the election, and her persistent, undaunted methods of work to further his aim; then her quiet unspoken faith in his honesty was eminently gratifying, especially as she was altogether incapable of grasping his motives, and said so in her sedate, gentle, indifferent voice—that voice which so often drove him fairly frantic. The perfect trust of such a superlatively conscientious person was a fine concession to a man, and a big compliment.

There was, besides, about this time a certain change in Beatrice, a sort of soft, restrained excitement, that pleased him; it was suggestive of some new experience, and Beatrice so rarely suggested any novelty.

One evening, after running amuck among the prejudices of his constituents with phenomenal brilliancy, he came and sat near her after dinner, and told her of his afternoon's work, and her eyes rested on him with the newness quite

startling in them, and there was a young little smile about her mouth.

"By Jove," he thought, "I hardly ever remember her looking at me before in ordinary talk!"

After that he constantly found himself trying to get her to look at him again. She had made him curious for the first time.

"What do you think of Colclough?" he asked her suddenly.

"I like him—I like him very much," she answered, with unusual expansiveness. "He seems to me so modest; I could believe anything good or even great of him, although he never speaks by any chance of himself."

"I am glad you see that—women don't, as a rule; they like him tremendously, but it's mostly for qualities they spin for him out of their own fancies. He had an awful time in India, a man told me the other day; he was beset before and behind by *femmes incomprises*, who would insist on his translating their souls for them. They had a sort of notion there that he had a history and a few score mysteries of his own in tow, consequently a sympathetic soul somewhere in the background; and by some trick of a rascally sub it got about that he wrote poetry—fellow couldn't rhyme a line to save his soul. He had to put the fear of Death in one or two of the tender beings, I can tell you, before he could clear them out. Some Indian women have a tenacious way with them, you know."

"Have they, Geoffrey?" she said simply.

"Yes, my dear, they have. That fellow," he went on, quite pleased with the little change in her generally so silent eyes, "has killed more tigers than any man of his length of service, and in bad places too, without proper escort. He's a great linguist besides, and has done a deal of exploring. Last year he wrote a very decent book of travels—wonder I never told you more of him."

She lowered her eyes; she did not want him to see the small cynical flash of mockery in them: when before had he told her anything of any one?

"He has got two Royal Humane Society medals into the bargain, and risked his life more than once without so much as a 'thank you'; and yet that young woman there treats him as she, no doubt, and deservedly, treated the little curate Bridges."

"She takes care of us all," said Beatrice, with a faint smile. "Then he is so ill; I think she thinks of that chiefly."

"H'm! looks on him as a patient, and forgets he's a man. He's not dead yet, and he'll give her a fine start some day. Serve her right too! Oh, no, don't interfere; they're old enough to take care of themselves, and it's fun looking on. You like *her*—no need to ask that."

"I like her—more than I can say," she added, with curious earnestness.

Suddenly he shifted his chair, and looked full at her.

"I'm awfully obliged to you, do you know, for the way you're working for me! It's quite true what Miss Weston says: if I do get in all the credit is due to you. They judge me through your ways of putting me,—myself undiluted wouldn't have had a show. I have a curiosity to know why you want this so much. Will you tell me?"

It was the very first thing he had ever asked her to do for him. She felt faint and sick inside, but outside she only looked a little quieter, more like her monotonous every-day self.

"I shall tell you some other time. It is a foolish little reason, perhaps, and it has altered; it is quite a different reason now from what it was in the beginning."

"Is this a riddle?"

"If you like to call it one."

"Are your hands thin? I think they are."

"Do you? Ah! perhaps it's only fancy."

"Why do you always wear tea-gowns now?"

It struck him he had not seen her in a proper low dress for an age.

"Tea-gowns are so comfortable. There will be so many weeks of enforced low necks when we get back to town."

After a minute or so he went over to launch Colclough out on some tiger yarns, and when he looked round for Beatrice she was gone. From that time he found quite a diverting interest in looking for surprises in his wife. It occurred to him after a little it was a more wholesome and far pleasanter pastime than superintending the making of ensilage.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Miss Dow, the district visitor, had just concluded a hurried sniff round Frank Weston's room, her parochial nose well in the air. She was a person made with a sordid regard to economy, except as to angles; and by some miscalculation in her make there had not been quite enough flesh left to cover these. Her spareness was a great help to her professionally. It enabled her to squeeze herself into any corner, and to step light. She was on sinners before they had a notion of her approach, and was thus frequently privileged to deal faithfully with them caught red-handed in the act. She was sharper in spotting female vice than male, from a feeling of modesty befitting the intricacies of her virgin state, but she overcame her natural feelings when duty demanded it of her.

She had already in her short inspection discovered many things about Frank, and all distinctly to his disadvantage; and was now standing, holding delicately between her finger and thumb, the last number of *Punch*.

When Frank came in she told him that she had ventured to place some tracts on his table. When he had thanked her warmly she ventured further,—

"Is it possible, Mr. Weston, that you approve of publications of this order for this neighbourhood?"

"*Punch!*" said Frank; "why not? There's nothing specially plutocratic about it, surely. Has it occurred to you that it might hurt their prejudices in any way?" He looked at her in a spirit of artless enquiry.

She cleared a space between her tracts and the journal.

"To our own consciences we stand or fall; it is not for me

to dictate," she observed. "No doubt you are aware that I visit in your neighbouring Vicar's, Mr. Driver's, parish?"

"Indeed!" said Frank. "I wonder what he's done to deserve you," he thought.

"I have called," she continued, "with reference to a young person living with Mrs. Bent, who lived till lately in my district."

"I wonder," he thought, "what she has ferreted out about Poll."

"She belonged to that class of women over whom—ahem!—we have to mourn daily. My attention was first drawn to her by a most damaging rumour of an infant,"—she flung her nose protestingly heavenwards,—"which infant disappeared mysteriously."

"Oh!" said Frank; "no doubt that was all right, and that the infant can be accounted for satisfactorily."

Miss Dow reflected on him for a moment with clasped lips.

"Since that time I have reason to believe the young woman has gone from bad to worse."

"I can reassure you on that point. She is honestly trying to do well, and working hard at a trade."

"I have, alas! very sufficient proof to the contrary."

"Proof?" He had no particular interest in her answer. He knew the stock suspicions of her kind, and quite believed in Poll as far as she went. He was watching her face with a sort of irreverent pity—wondering if any one outside a near relative ever had had the courage to kiss her.

"Yes, incontestable proof." Weston's attitude irritated her. "It is not my custom to speak at random." She waited, but he decided to give her her head, and smothered a yawn. "This young woman has been seen at twelve at night, Mr. Weston, in a street, the name of which I prefer not to mention, talking with those persons—giggling——"

"Have you seen her, Miss Dow?"

"I, Mr. Weston! Do you for a moment imagine that I perambulate an unspeakable street at midnight?"

"I was a trifle astonished, but with a woman of your *zeal one never* knows. You have her watched, then?"

"Certainly I have."

"Oh, indeed!"

She would stand this no longer. Watch her—her, indeed—out of that chair with a sort of a smile on his face, as if some one had lately made a joke. There was a carnal look about it, very unpleasant indeed. And *she* quite alone in the room too! She would report the matter—possibly to the Bishop. A sudden little thrill of pleasure made her quite weak and human. It would be delightful to write to a Bishop, on any account whatever; but a horrid conviction that she did not know in the least how to address a Bishop brought her up with a gasp. She forgot her modulated tones of Christian sorrow, and raised her voice disagreeably.

"The girl also holds midnight orgies at the house of that once decent woman, Mrs. Bent, and bids her friends to them." She paused and lowered her head bashfully. "The nature of these orgies I cannot dwell upon—nor is it necessary, as I am informed that you yourself, Mr. Weston, frequent them."

"Anything else, Miss Dow?"

"Do you desire more, Mr. Weston?"

"No; on the whole, I think I have had enough. Of what girl have you been speaking all this time?" he asked, in a low, careful tone.

"Of a young person calling herself Miss Daintree."

He took two steps towards her and looked at her for a minute, right into her shabby restless eyes, and he was disarmed at once. Such things in a woman's eyes hurt a man who has had a good mother. He wanted to forget what he had seen, and to try to regain his trust in God. He came back and spoke down at her gently.

"It's rather a waste of breath to tell you, Miss Dow, for you know it quite well, that Miss Daintree is a good girl, with no shadow of suspicion about her except, possibly, what you yourself may have sown in your rounds. It is also a waste of energy to inform you—as you also know it quite well—that in these midnight walks and orgies you mention this girl—or young lady: of course you will have

seen she is that—has done and is doing a very noble work, entailing enormous self-sacrifice. Leave Miss Daintree and her methods to God, Miss Dow. You will find plenty of work more befitting your capacities."

"I have not sought your advice, Mr. Weston; I came with a warning. It is not the first time in the history of the Church of God that Delilah has shorn the strength of His servants."

"Miss Daintree, I suppose, is Delilah, and I am the servant? Unfortunately for me, Miss Dow, you are quite out of it. Miss Daintree has never shown the most distant inclination to shear me. I wish she had."

Miss Dow collected her tracts and returned them to her bag. It was her symbolical and delicate way of casting his dust off her feet.

"If it would interest you in the least to know it, or if it would be any help to you professionally," he said, as he opened the door for her, "I may tell you that I am going round directly to ask Miss Daintree if she will do me the honour to be my wife. I don't for a moment suppose she will, but I mean to ask her. And now, in gratitude for this gratuitous piece of information, you will oblige me by never on any pretence whatsoever entering this house again; and I will request Mr. Driver to keep you out of this parish."

"I hope God may forgive you, Mr. Weston."

"I hope He may. Good-bye."

He shut the door with a pleasant smile, but he thought that for a sinful man he had stood a good deal. He went back to his room and opened the window. The woman seemed to have used up all the freshness of the air.

"Well," he thought, "Mrs. Grundy in the odious body of Miss Dow has precipitated matters finely, and probably spoilt a small fraction of chance I might have had. What's Driver been at all this time that he hasn't choked her! No wonder he looks sickly, and that his sermons are—well, as they are! I wish he'd keep his parochial femininity in their own waters. This has upset all my calculations, but it's the only thing to do now that that viper's on the war-path. I

wonder what she'll say, what she'll think, how she'll look? Well, when all's said and done, I have a wretched conviction that I have as much chance now as ever I shall have. I could make her happy, too, even if she is altogether too good for me. I wonder why we all have our day of crying for the moon? I wonder when Rica's coming up? She'd be a nice cosy person to have about just now."

He went off to brush his hair and set out on his mission, swinging his stick.

Meanwhile, Margaret was having a steady cry in her room, a most unusual occurrence nowadays, for she had learned self-control in a fine school, and as a rule she practised it. She had indeed at first stretched out foolish hands for help, and had done her little best to tear pity from the skies; but she soon found that the only thing really left for her to do was to fold her hands and to wait.

And as she waited she found, in her little drab world, that bad as was her plight there were others in even a worse. Then gradually a new pain for the wretches more God-forsaken than herself grew up on the top of the old, and formed a coating over it, and in a way kept it from throbbing. This new pain was like the scorching of caustic—inasmuch that it healed while it hurt.

But a healing film is a delicate tissue, and Miss Dow had, a little earlier in the day, before her call on Frank, stripped it off in the superfine way of the consciously righteous.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Bent was out for the day; Poll was at work, so Margaret had to receive her visitor's broadsides without a soul to back her. She never could put up with Miss Dow, and was by no means backward in making her aware of the fact by her own restrained, well-bred impertinence in return for the other's fanatical revilings, and she had in the end gloriously routed her enemy.

But not till the enemy had done what she had come to do: that was, to leave Margaret feeling very forlorn and bruised all over. Indeed, as she sat and cried, everything inside her seemed to go wrong. The sense of the futility of the sacrifice she had made in the first instance fell on her

like a sudden blow. Who was one atom the better for it? How could she even tell if it had done as she had meant it to do—save Geoffrey and his wife? She knew nothing; she was groping darkly in a land where hope lies slain. She was toiling day and night, only to be confounded every hour by the fact that there had been "put a bridle in the jaws of the people causing them to err." Had she thrust herself, and all to no purpose, out of a world brilliant with hope and possibilities into this? Why could she not have let things go and been happy, as only she and Geoffrey in the whole wide world knew how to be?

She thrust conscience aside, held her breath, shut her eyes, and took a big leap back into the past; and presently rose up again, giddy and dazed, but in a whirling tumult of joy. A woman's thin screech and the howl of a kicked cur pulled her up. She shuddered back into the present. Then an aggravated detestation for the ugliness of her life took her by the throat. The grey, narrow, monotonous streets seemed to close in on her and stifle her. The squalling of squalid infants made aches in her ears; the curses of half-drunken women filled her with disgust and anger against all womenkind. Even the clean, inoffensive Dutch carpet on her room, and the cane chairs, and the splashboard with puce bulrushes on it, made her feel sick. Everything about her was so little, so carefully considered, so retail. Bodies, souls, brains, houses, and effects all to match, all microscopical, and the result of her hope and toil just the same—more microscopical than all the rest.

A sudden cold fear came on her: would her youth and prettiness slip away from her in this dulness? would her soul fine down to a miserable sharp point, and would she become just a half-sentient monotonous detail with a grievance like all the others?

Then another idea began to take definite shape in her. It had been simmering vaguely in her sub-consciousness since she had known Mr. Weston and his friend, and had recognised the queer under-current of reverence in their treatment of her, and noticed little things they had said—

little, trivial, simple things, but enough to give one a notion. Was she really a hypocrite, or was she only coerced into being like one, as she seemed to have been coerced into everything else? For what passed for goodness in her was really nothing but the result of the pressure of circumstances, and possibly, she thought worriedly, had no foundations of its own to stand on. Else, why should she feel such sudden revolts against her surroundings, sudden sick sensations now and again at the mere sight and sound of her frousy protégées? No saint ever felt the least atom like that, or if so her chroniclers forgot to mention it.

She shivered as the saint occurred to her; but she grew warm as with an impulse of wilfulness her mind veered round to David, and she felt herself hoping that he had a good time with Bathsheba, and wishing, half-reluctantly, that it hadn't been cut short quite so soon. She recollected her duty in a minute, and felt rueful and disappointed in herself.

"Oh," she thought, "what Caroline said was perfectly true! I could be as bad as any one. I daresay there's a whole unexplored mine of evil in me. I believe half the time when I am working like anything for other people I am longing, panting, pining myself for whole heartfuls of the world, the flesh, and the devil; and if my world and things differ from theirs, after all it's only a mere question of race and education. Oh! this isn't the way of good women, and it accounts for the fact that I never can by any chance advise any one."

She sighed wearily, and glanced round the clean, bright room, that looked as if it were made of cheap remnants.

"It's like everything else," she thought, "in all these countless streets. Everything and everybody is just a remnant,—not one sound, wholesome, untouched body and soul, fresh from God's manufactory, in the whole place."

CHAPTER XXXV.

SHE had just arrived at this pleasing state of morbidness when a knock came to the door, a resolute knock, that meant to be attended to.

Margaret darted to the window.

"Mr. Weston!" she cried, making a dash at the glass,—"and my eyes? They're impossible!" It was hopeless to rub them. She went desperately to the door. "Possibly he won't come in as Mrs. Bent is out," she thought dejectedly, keeping the door carefully half-closed in his face.

He coolly opened it, and as soon as they got into the room put her down in a chair.

"You might have asked me in," he said; "this is unlike the hospitable ways of Mrs. Bent's house. Have you had your tea yet?"

"No."

"Neither have I."

She got up, laughing rather weakly.

"You cut the bread and butter," said Frank, "I'll boil the kettle; I see it's meant to be done on this fire." He turned his back on her, and in his man's way began to worry the kettle, that would have boiled directly if only he had given it half a chance. "That individual," he said back at her, "isn't worth crying about, unless you happen to be crying for her lost soul, and even then I fear it would only be wasted breath on your part. I have had her this afternoon—she left me raging, if you like! but with not the slightest inclination to cry. Don't think any more of her. She's a blight one should blot off one's mind at the earliest *possible* opportunity."

"How did you know Miss Dow had been here?" Margaret asked, wondering if her eyes looked as awful as they felt.

"I had an inward conviction—I came to see if I was right."

"That was very good of you!"

"I should hardly call it that. I came for purely selfish reasons."

"It was extremely unfortunate in one way that you did come."

She wished he would turn round, that she might see his nose. It always took away from her any feeling of shyness; there was an air of strength and sense about it.

"Oh indeed!"

"You will perhaps imagine that I pass my time howling. I don't, by any means. As to Miss Dow, if she hadn't set me off I should have forgotten her existence long ago."

"And now you've to forget your own, and to think of tea, which is a far more important matter. I am ready with this kettle, if you are with the other things."

"Mrs. Bent left everything on the tray. I have only this bread and butter to cut, and I've done it vilely. However, it matches your tea. Look! you put oceans of water, but forgot the tea."

"That's a mere detail," said Frank, repairing his mistake. "I'll tell you something which isn't, but, on the contrary, comes perilously near to being an episode. You've given me the cracked cup. Mrs. Bent always takes it herself, and keeps the crack turned towards her."

"And I'm using the every-day cream-jug. The best is bronze, and has pink forget-me-nots on it."

"And 'A Present from Epping Forest' on its back. If Mrs. Bent came in she'd have a fit, and the last trump and general confusion of ranks would suggest themselves to her."

"She's so charmingly exclusive."

"She is. It's only in her and her like that one ever nowadays meets with the true aristocratic instinct. One is thankful in her presence to have the Christian names of both one's great-grandmothers at one's finger-tips, and to be

able conscientiously to swear that they invariably wore clocked silk stockings."

"A man who knows all about his great-grandmothers' silk stockings should make better tea. At first it was all water, now it's all tea."

"We're not domesticated persons, I imagine."

"Do domesticated young men exist?"

"I'm told they're coming in, as a corrective to the advanced young woman."

"It has been the dream of my life to meet an advanced young woman; but, now that you suggest him, I think a domesticated young man would be more piquant."

"I shall bring round the first I catch. I must bring my sister Rica round, too, directly I can get hold of her; she makes excellent tea."

"I thought all folded-lamb girls who could manage it were in London now."

"Oh, Rica's down in the country canvassing for a man with notions and a lately-excavated conscience and other embarrassing complications. But I think his wife, backed by Rica and a tidy amount of landed interest, will haul him in all right. His wife is a fine white creature, to whom most things on earth, more especially her husband, are sealed mysteries. But she's very fetching—Rica's devoted to her."

Margaret's thoughts flew back to her one earthly experience of a fine white creature, and her eyes suddenly darkened in a blabbing way they had. Frank saw the change in them, and he somehow felt as if he had seen the death-warrant of his hopes: it made him curiously gentle with her. Margaret found an indefinable change in his manner, and wondered how it came about.

It struck Frank just then that it must be a rare experience for her to have a man to take care of her, and to do man's work generally. He used his opportunity to the full, although he knew by some instinct that all the time he was working against himself.

Margaret, however, felt soothed and in her right place.

The horrid, belittling, retail feeling of everything began to vanish; old memories began to stir in her, old scents to float round; even the noises in the street gradually altered, as she sat and let Frank amuse her, and an old dead sound of rushing, purling, swishing waters came to life in her. She leaned eagerly forward, with parted lips and eyes full of laughter, and gave him back joke for joke.

Frank felt himself first startled, then enthralled—intoxicated—with the radiant, superb happiness on the girl's face, precisely as had happened to Hyde in his day, but with a difference. Hyde had a delightful consciousness that he himself had set this miracle of radiancy afloat; the poor parson, on the contrary, had a horrid conviction that now he had completely done for himself.

He had, indeed, succeeded in his design; he had cheered her up, not to say metamorphosed her; but it was not of him she thought, or she let him move her as he listed. It was not for him her eyes laughed, her dimples deepened, her mouth melted. It was for the other man—the same man, Frank felt vindictively and vaguely, for whose sake she had hid her youth in the desert.

He suddenly tripped in his speech and pulled up short. She came to her senses as suddenly. The waters ceased to flow, and a child's howl from the curb gutter struck her ears, and something in Frank's face arrested her laugh. Some impulse made her half stand up.

"Sit down," he said, with a sudden resolve to plunge in. "I must tell you something."

She sat down a little fearfully, and looked at him.

"I came here to-day to tell you that I love you as much as I know, and to ask you to be my wife."

Margaret whitened and shrank back. She tried to frame some words and to get them said, but they stuck in her throat and hurt her.

"I never dreamt of this," she said at last. "I thought people must know without my telling that that sort of thing has nothing to do with me now. Couldn't you see I had lived all that part of me?"

"But, dear, you're so young. Nothing can be quite final at your age. Let me go on loving you, and some day perhaps old feelings will have grown dim with time, and then you can love me back. If you can make ever so small a beginning, just give me one little shred of hope——"

"But I can't! You see this minute I love another man with every bit of me, and I can't change myself. I may be young, but my love is final."

"But why, then——"

"Why, then, don't I marry him? Because he is already married. Still, it's just as impossible to marry you——"

"But you——"

"I? No; I didn't know at the time."

"The man was sane. He could hardly plead ignorance. Will you sacrifice——"

"Sane or insane," she said drearily, "we loved each other, and that's the end of it. I had to love him the very first minute I saw him, and he had to love me. It was all wrong: but I don't think we settle these things for ourselves."

"But, dear, if he's married——"

"But even if he is, I shall have to love him, if I never see him again. We both did our best to make it different for him," she added simply, "on account of his wife. Besides, I'm told that time does wonders for men. I have just to think, you see, of how I feel myself."

"Have you met or spoken to him since——"

He felt a brute the minute the words had taken shape. But he was hard driven; he hardly knew till then how very dear she was.

"No; we are neither of us that sort of person."

"I think," he said in a low voice, "he is a better fellow under the circumstances than I should have been."

She looked at him, and a sudden wave of pity for him filled her eyes with tears.

"No," she said, "he's not. We don't measure our love by the degrees of a man's goodness. We love them—well,

because we love them. And you came late, that is all. All I had to give was given. Don't think I'm not grateful," she went on abruptly, "or don't know how much your offer means, or what a sacrifice it is on your part. You know absolutely nothing of me. You don't know even if I am commonly respectable or not. You don't know if that wretched baby of Miss Dow's isn't a living fact. But if it was, and that you had known it, I don't believe it would have made any difference. I haven't had a very wide experience, but I know true love when I see it. I wish—I wish you had shown me just a mere glimmer of it before, and I might have saved you some sorrow."

"Never mind, dear."

"But how can I help minding, horribly?" She looked keenly at him. "The man I love is not a better man than you—you are the better of the two, and much more grown up; and yet," she said in a soft low voice, "if I had lived with you for years, if you had loaded me with loving-kindness, cherished me in sorrow and in joy, and if I saw the other man out in the cold, half naked and a beggar, and if he still wanted me, my first impulse would be to throw up everything and to follow him; and even if a vague clinging to conventions and duty restrained me, and I let him pass on without another look, I should have proved myself unworthy to be the wife of a man like you. Don't you remember your own sermon?"

He was confounded out of his own mouth with a vengeance, and the tender, protecting, frank sorrow in her eyes as they rested on him hurt him perhaps more than her refusal, for they showed how final it was. He was speechless and impotent. The fact that in most girls' "No" there is an echo of "Yes" gives many a man courage, and if he has anything to say for himself he says it. Frank had plenty to say, but he said nothing. He turned away and started out into the street for a minute, then he took his hat mechanically and made for the door. Margaret jumped up in a sudden fright.

Was he going to leave her with a face like that? If he

did, he would never come back again himself—it would be a strange man she would meet the next time.

She had too few friends, she could not afford to lose the very best of them; no stranger could ever fill his place for her. She seized his hat, put it down on a chair, and took hold of his hands.

"Will it hurt you too much to be my friend still—not to come back in some vague future, but to keep my friend now, straight off with no break at all? Don't think me too abjectly selfish, but I want you to come just as you have done since we have known each other, and to be just as you have been. It is a thankless thing to ask so much when I have so little to give. It wouldn't, you see, be such a great thing to some girls to lose a friend," she went on breathlessly, "but to me it seems disastrous, I am so friendless." She looked wistfully into his face. "It would have been so easy to love you—but you see it has been made impossible for me."

"I see," he said gently. "I shall take your friendship, dear, and do my best to keep my love from boring you; but you'll understand, by your own case, it will hardly be possible to alter its character."

"No," she said, still breathlessly; "but I'm so brutally selfish, I simply can't give you up—even give you a respite to pull yourself together in, and to give love the airs of friendship."

"No need you should."

"And perhaps," she said, with a wild thought of consolation, "perhaps, after all, men are not so like burs as girls. One can't quite tell what time and other girls may not do for you. There are crowds of both before you."

He laughed huskily. "There are," he said. "We'll leave it to them, for the present. However, I wish every one whom it may concern, but especially every one whom it may not, to understand distinctly that I have asked you to be my wife and that you have refused me. I have already told Miss Dow I meant to ask you."

She loosed his hands and started back flushing.

"Was it from a sort of duty—protection idea, then——"

He laughed. "No, it was just your own case over again. I had to love you; then the next natural step was to ask you to marry me. Does it never occur to you to look in the glass?"

"It does, frequently. But, surely, mere prettiness is common enough in your world, with the distinct advantages of accessories. Girls are the better, even morally, for a fine setting. I'm quite certain it's harder to be commonly, decently good this side of Oxford Street than it is the other side. Give me your friendship—but seek your love on the other side."

"Ah, some day we'll discuss all that. Meantime, will you kiss me just once?" he said softly. "It will do me a lot more good than advice, you poor little thing!"

She was bitterly sorry for him—it hurt her terribly to see the tired look of him. She would have done any mortal thing for him but this.

"How can I? You understand just how things are. You wouldn't like to kiss another girl yourself—well, say, quite for six months, now would you?"

"No," he said, making a praiseworthy shot at a laugh; "perhaps I should allow myself a few months' respite."

"And we are such burs," she explained deprecatingly.

"I had better clear," he thought, "while I have any wits left. Good-bye, little bur."

"I wish—I wish I could have helped it!"

"So do I—it spoilt our tea-party."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HYDE won his election by a good neck, and his constituents, while unaffectedly adoring him, shook in their shoes, and prepared their minds for sensations. The more intellectually alert among them nourished and wound up their consciences in view of any sudden calls or extra strain on them; while every individual unit among them, whether with a conscience or without, had an uneasy conviction somewhere in him that he had let loose on the world a power, and that it was quite a toss-up as to the future goings-on of this power. It might carry them all to heaven in a fiery chariot; it might, on the contrary, blow them in a twinkling to perdition.

Hyde's first impression on any one was to make that person think of him, and fall forthwith into speculations concerning him. Unfortunately, in the case of women, the thoughts generally grew and multiplied, and the speculations waxed wild.

Directly, then, he had thrown off his apathy of indifference, and had set seriously to bring himself and his county into direct personal contact, the same thing happened—every adult creature, man or woman, friend or foe, broke out into thoughts and speculations with regard to this simple, plain-spoken, but exceedingly courteous young man, and his potential possibilities.

"Hang it all!" said Colclough one day, "what the fools see in you I can't imagine! It was the same at Eton, then at Christ's: you chucked yourself into the consciousness of every one you came across. What's queerer still," he continued sadly, "you kept there, and went on simmering in him."

"I was only elected yesterday," said Hyde; "can't you let a fellow R. I. P. and smoke in comfort? I shall have to listen to enough jaw before the year's out. If fellows are asses, I'm not responsible for them."

"I don't blame you," said Colclough indulgently. "You can't help it. It's something in your make not visible to the naked eye. Perhaps it's Divine grace—perhaps it's the devil—who can tell? But here you are now simmering in the interior of every man-Jack of the population within a reach of ten miles, and if you're going to do anything to justify all inward commotion you're causing it's pretty near time you began."

Geoffrey smoked on in lazy peace for a minute or two.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "it isn't I who have set vacant minds agog this time. It's Beatrice. For such a sedate, unimpressionable person her effects are quite startling."

"You're confounding her effects and your own. She could never by any chance startle any mind, however melodramatic. You startle them and set them jabbering. She silences them, and fills them with a sort of essence of reverence that half awes them. They think of her on dark nights, and when it occurs to them to say their prayers."

Geoffrey felt suddenly warm with a half-reluctant and altogether astonished flush of gratitude.

"You think a lot of Beatrice!"

"A good woman is always a lot to me; and if she's handsome as well, no doubt the effect's intensified."

They smoked in silence for a few minutes. Geoffrey said at last,—

"You heard about the other girl?"

"I did."

"Miss Weston told you?"

Colclough nodded.

"I behaved like a beast in that business. I was deuced hard driven—and——"

"Oh yes, I know all about it. She was a young thing, full of all manner of possibilities, like yourself—kindred

souls, and all that. The details, if combined, would have clashed like the devil in no time, blown you both sky-high, or landed you in the ditch." He remembered suddenly a look on Rica's face as she had told him the story. "All the same, she was a good girl. You're lucky in your women—should live up to 'em."

"No doubt. All the same, 'living up' is a fag now and again. One tires at times of craning to a star."

"Take it easy," suggested Colclough. "There's more woman than star in all feminine creatures. Always a mistake to consider the star first—crick in the neck puts you off the other a lot."

Geoffrey looked moody and said nothing. Colclough lighted a fresh pipe and fell to turning him over in his mind. They had been friends at Eton and at Christ's, and at the present moment liked each other probably better than they had ever done before. They were drawn together by a common, but unexpressed, and almost unconscious bond of sympathy. Hyde was frightfully sorry for the dilapidated physical condition and the evident suffering of the other man, who in his turn felt a regret of a paternal order for what he looked upon as a precisely similar state of things in the mental and moral economy of Hyde.

They were very much the same age, but Colclough looked upon himself as the elder man by a long way. Hyde's manner was enough to keep his youth fresh in him; besides, Colclough's present certainty that death had got the better of the life in him gave him in his own eyes age, and an unpleasant sense of weight—gave him, in fact, a tendency now and again to preach.

Like every one else, he looked upon Hyde as a man with a career before him, and was beset with qualms of doubt as to its nature. From his earlier knowledge of him he considered that he should have been by this time well launched out on this career for good or evil. But then he had been handicapped by bad checks: first, his marriage; then his folly with Margaret. The inoffensive decency of his life since she had disappeared from it, now that he had seen

more of him, didn't count for much with Colclough. No doubt the fact of his straightness was due in some measure to a strong sense of loyalty to his promises to her, and to a chivalrous desire to do his best for a good wife; but his apathy had a lot more to do with it, in Colclough's opinion. He had not enough go for the stock temptations incidental to his state of loose ends.

Now, however, that he had elected to wake up was the time to look out for squalls. Colclough here began to contrast Geoffrey's former appreciative and all-embracing, if a trifle easy-going, relish for his privileges with some of the things he had noticed lately in London. He remembered one evening, especially, watching him at a ball. He had, with his customary luck, got hold of the prettiest and wittiest woman in the room, and had begun to do his duty by her quite genially. He had said a number of smart things, and had put her on even more excellent terms with herself than usual, when he suddenly appeared bored to death, and got stuck in the midst of a sentence, while she looked round to see if she had got hold of a lunatic. He remembered her directly, but clean forgot what he had been saying, and struck out coolly on a new track. She forgave him, too, Colclough thought with a grin. He saw her looking radiant, sitting out a dance with him, later on in the night. It was the same with everything—it was all done by reflex action, from hunting to the drainage of his village; and if it was well done, no thanks to him. He never happened to do things badly. Some fellows get into the way of pulling things off all right.

Colclough felt instinctively that Mrs. Hyde knew all this quite well, and that one reason of her absorbed, anxious interest in his election was to have a political career ready to his hand directly he woke up completely, and was ready for active mischief or otherwise. Colclough had seen very early in his acquaintance with Mrs. Hyde that though she was single-minded to a fault, and hadn't a spark of imagination —was, besides, crassly ignorant of the world—she had yet a curious, swift knack of getting to the ultimate truth in things

and persons. She hadn't understood one of the motives of Geoffrey's refusal to commit himself to any given set of opinions, but she had recognised that what seemed to him a big truth lay at the bottom of all of them; if she had not done so, she would not have moved a finger to help him, and so Rica had often explained to him.

She had known the whole truth of Margaret's meetings with her husband before a breath of scandal had reached any one else, and directly she saw the girl she was ready to acknowledge her belief in her truth. The fact was, her own nature was so pure and delicate that she could not be anything but accurate in her soundings, and she never failed to detect a false note. With all her limits, this would have been an embarrassing and blood-curdling power in any one less well bred than herself—at times it made even her rather hard for mortal man to live with, Colclough thought with a concerned shrug in Hyde's direction.

"A woman with such a confoundedly accurate scent for truth ought to know more. It's like living under a searchlight that magnifies indiscriminately and gives undue importance to everything."

Just then Beatrice and Rica came in. It struck Colclough that Mrs. Hyde, from one point of view, had done foolishly in choosing Rica for a friend. Her wholesome, well-proportioned breadth gave a suggestion of scragginess to the other woman's ethereal slenderness. The same thought struck Geoffrey, and annoyed him in an odd way.

"A fat wife would be an unutterable bore; but—I wonder how her collar-bones are! One can't see them under those tea-gowns."

Then he went over and softened the light. It seemed to him a beastly shabby thing to let her stand under the full glare of a cross-light, with the other girl so close to her.

"We're suffering horribly from reaction," said Rica, settling into a chair. "We came to see how you felt. The world is at an end now you're disposed of for the present, Mr. Hyde, and with nothing fresh coming up."

"With bulbs bursting up all over the place," said Col-

clough. "It was green under that tree yesterday, now it's yellow with crocuses." He looked out of the window with an air of lazy interest. "There's a dash of violet, too—that's since the morning."

"I want a novelty," said Rica, "and you suggest Nature. She asked bread, and he gave her a stone. The upspringing of crocuses may soothe, but it doesn't excite."

"There's always a certain excitement in watching an adventurous spirit. Imagine the pluck of putting your head above ground on a day like this."

"Ah, that's it. It's forbidden fruit for you in a mild way." She put on her motherly look for him. "The east wind, this afternoon, has all the elements of true friendship: it pierces to the very marrow of your bones."

"I agree with you, Miss Weston," said Hyde; "after an election one wants more than crocuses."

"There's Season," suggested Colclough, "ready to your hand."

"Season! Why, my good fellow, we want an absolutely *new* sensation! We have the explorer's mania on us. Isn't that it, Miss Weston? I shouldn't bother myself, if I were you, however; these things always come to women, without the bother of going out after them."

"That, at least, is a new doctrine."

"I fear not, else I should feel the unmistakable warm shiver of a creator. I assure you it's we who have to go out prospecting in strange soils, making ourselves in a beastly mess with clay and mud, before we find anything at all. When we have found it, and begin to think that we alone of all the world have found a new thing, the assayers of these products tell us it's as old as Babylon. Neither crocuses, balls, nor even teas, will be enough after this election racket, so as soon as Beatrice has settled back in town I'm going for a month to Ireland."

"To look for something new?" said Colclough. "Oh Lord!"

"Has it anything to do with Home Rule?" said Beatrice, looking earnestly at him, half-doubtful, half-pleased.

Was it, after all, possible that the merest atom of family tradition had got somehow into him and was making for righteousness? She gave a little nervous sigh, and waited for his answer.

"I'm afraid," he said, watching her amusedly, "that Home Rule isn't in it. My one object in going to Ireland just now is to contemplate that wretched, used-up topic from a point of view from which even the idea, past or future, of Home Rule has been rigorously excluded. That's where the notion of novelty comes in, you see."

"Then," said Beatrice, with wide, surprised eyes, "it will hardly be Ireland any longer."

"But that's what I'm trying to arrive at. Think what a delightful place it would be if it weren't Ireland."

That required imagination, so she passed it, and gave utterance to her two hereditary Irish associations.

"The hunting is over; and isn't the fishing better here?"

"But I'm not going to hunt or fish; I'm going to see Ireland—my Ireland and its natives—from a fresh standpoint. When I come back I'll tell you the result."

She wondered a little sadly if she would understand it, and be able to grasp any joke it might contain. She always considered her sensations with reference to him before she thought of herself personally. When she thought of his being away for a whole month—thirty-one days—her heart fell slowly and her upper lip lengthened in an uninteresting way it had when she was miserable.

"How prim and dogged she can look!" thought Colclough. "A woman has no right to hurt a man with a face like that. Poor old Geoff!"

He wondered, and so did Rica, what Hyde meant by this sudden Irish scheme; but, as they saw he had not the smallest notion of telling them, they held their tongues.

"Rica," said Beatrice suddenly, "will you stay with me while Geoffrey is away?"

"I was wondering if I should have the courage to ask you to let me," said Rica. "It would be delightful, espe-

cially as my step-mother's second cousin died lately. Her relatives have a startling way of dropping off when anything is going on. They never by any chance vanish in the silly season, and my step-mother has the tribal instinct quite fiercely developed in her. She detests this person, but she will be in complimentary mourning for a month, and so will the house. You're a dear angel for asking me!"

"You'll take care of her, won't you?" said Colclough solicitously. "Beef-tea, you know, and draughts."

"It's only men who need taking care of," she explained scornfully. "We are reasonable beings, and understand the science of consequences. We'll take care of each other, and have a good time. We'll also keep our eyes open, and see what we can pick up in the way of new things."

"I'll lay long odds," said Colclough," that you'll find more in the 'daily round' than Geoffrey will by crossing the sea. Can't you leave that till later?"

"I can't," said Geoffrey, rolling a cigarette.

He did not notice the sudden leap of hope into his wife's eyes at Colclough's question, nor their sudden dulling at his answer. Colclough did, however; he felt curiously sorry for her. "But after all," he thought, in the superior tone of a spurious old age, "what's a month in the days of one's youth? It isn't fair, somehow, either to him or to herself, that she should take it like this."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DIRECTLY Geoffrey had gone to Ireland, Rica noticed an odd, indefinite change in Beatrice. His going, it was evident, worried her out of all proportion to the occasion; and yet it was a relief. Beatrice relaxed herself thankfully; she fell back into her old prim apathy; she walked more slowly, she talked less; the strange charm of newness vanished from her, even the pretty colour often left her cheeks, and her eyes were no longer invariably brilliant at night.

This was, however, only on off days and at odd times. She went everywhere she should go, and then she looked always as she ought to look, and she in every way did all she could to make Rica happy. But she greedily seized on every free instant to rest in, and rested in the same steadfast, purposeful way in which she had canvassed for her husband.

Rica could in no sort of way make her out. She grew altogether too aggravating. In about a week after Geoffrey's departure she spoke to Colclough about it.

"I can't understand her at all," she said one evening.

They were sitting out a dance. Colclough had wanted to dance it, but Rica didn't think it was good for him, and had insisted on conveying him to a sheltered corner.

"She's quite too sphinxy. I like her enormously—a lot more than I did even, but she confuses me and makes me vulgar. It is distinctly vulgar to be always trying to get at a person who doesn't want to be got at, and yet I have a frantic sort of notion that it's my absolute duty to go on prodding till I get into her, and find out everything."

"Used you to prod into the six brothers also on principle?" Colclough asked despairingly.

"No, it's only necessary to prod skilfully and scientifically into one man to find clues to all the others. You see, there's an infinite variety in our make, as in all other things about us, otherwise chaos must have come long ago; men would no longer have found surprises in women, and the action of the world must have stopped with a jerk. All the same," she continued, with some disapproval, "women have no business to spring surprises on *one another*. I want to be prepared for Beatrice."

"But what about the slices off one pudding you spoke of?"

"They're varied by sauces and condiments and a thousand etceteras—things you could never grasp in detail in your single state. You don't surely suppose that a man ever comes to the bed-rock of pudding until after marriage?" She did not want just then to argue this matter out, so she went on serenely, "Look at her. Isn't she fine? Now I don't suppose you have the haziest idea that those shimmering opal clouds in which she's wrapped compose a masterpiece and cost a fortune?"

"No, I have not. But I have a very distinct idea that she's a lot thinner there, just under her ear, than any woman has a right to be."

"Yes, her thinness is a horrid puzzle. It's a part of her general sphinxyness. You see, she puts me off in her sweet prim way, just is if I were a foolish man, and had no reasonable excuse for my curiosity. I am so wretchedly healthy myself that symptoms are beyond me." She took a half-irritated survey of him. "Now you, with your experience, might come in so usefully."

"It's gratifying to be an authority on any subject," said Colclough. "She's ill, and I oughtn't to have to hint to any one so far advanced in the up-to-date wisdom of serpents as yourself that it's no manner of use prodding into a woman of that temperament. If she's silent, she has a purpose in being so. You'll not surprise her into speech. All the same," he went on, looking at Beatrice, "I have a notion that she'll some day, very soon, surprise you into

silence. She's losing control over herself; she wants the presence of Geoffrey to keep her nerves strung up. Poor thing!"

He said it with such genuine, unusual feeling that Rica let him off his small gibe at herself.

"A good breakdown would do her a world of good."

Rica involuntarily drew a deep breath.

"You surely have no experience of these things yourself!" said Colclough; he felt scared at the mere thought.

"I? Good gracious, no! I'm an absolutely lost soul. I tell you I haven't a solitary yearning in all this big world, and I simply abhor turning myself inside out; it's much better fun doing it to other people, if the fulness of time demands something in that line from one. Do you see that man there sadly scanning the horizon? This is our dance, and he's looking for me. You will notice his fine intellectual brow; moreover, he's a little knock-kneed, and weak on the near fore. By birth he's a baronet, and by nature intense. He belongs to two professions—he's a minor poet and an experimental sinner; he conveys to you in the most dreamy and vague manner the enormity and astonishing novelty of his vices; he battens on remorse, and wails like an Æolian harp over his neuroses; and you have a fine secret conviction all the time that he's somehow too flabby to have a nerve in his body, and that he's too much of a prig even to be wicked with any degree of activity. He's going to propose to me to-night. My robust commonplaceness has been recommended to him as an antidote to his neurotic exaltation, and he has been gradually urging himself up to the point."

"And you let him? Rather hard lines on the fellow!"

"I couldn't undertake the appointment permanently," she continued, serenely, watching with much interest her baronet floundering crossly through the crowd, "but I have a sort of sympathy for him; he requires experience, and I can see my way in this coming situation to help him to some. He has taken enormous trouble—for him, you know—to brace himself to this effort. He has discussed the in-

finite grind of necessity's driving with two men at his club at odd times for a whole week. Brothers are useful things, Mr. Colclough. So, as a kindly recognition of my obligations to him, I feel it my stern duty just to act for once as a nerve tonic. Couldn't you manage to cough badly—even to sneeze? He's within earshot now. I should like you to see him—think first, then tingle visibly—Ah, Sir Bernard, is this our dance?"

The day after the ball Beatrice looked more tired than ever, so Rica insisted, as there was nothing particular on, that she should rest the whole day—just pretend to write letters all the morning, lie down till tea-time, then a nice dowagery drive, and a little dinner all to their two selves in the loosest, most abandoned-looking tea-gowns. After which, they would neither stir out nor allow any one in. It was a delightful little plan, and yet Beatrice seemed more uncomfortable and containedly restless than ever she had done before. And Rica, although she had a most delicious memory of her baronet, and woman as revealed to him by herself, to console her, felt bored to extinction and a little impatient.

They had lost a whole day, and for absolutely nothing. She had even missed Frank when she had rushed across to see him while Beatrice rested after lunch. She wanted terribly to see Margaret, but she felt she must first see Frank. When ten o'clock came, she yawned softly and stood up.

"Perhaps," she thought, "bed will be grateful and comforting, if nothing else is. It's horrid to think, too, that Sir Bernard must now have recovered, and is at this moment having a delightful time, and is already believing that he refused me with cracking heart-strings from the most exalted motives. Possibly he's writing a sonnet, and calling it 'The Renunciation,' and that he'll even make five pounds out of it. Beatrice! Mercy! what is it?"

Beatrice had stood up in a half-absent way, when a spasm of pain suddenly twisted across her face, her lips got rigid and bluish, and she half fell back on the sofa. Rica took her softly in her arms to lay her quite down, thinking it was

a faint, but she gave a shrill, broken scream of pain. Rica darted to the bell, but an inarticulate, eager cry from the sofa brought her back.

"Wait," whispered Beatrice; "medicine's in pocket—better—soon."

Rica got it out, took a small Venetian glass from a table, and poured the prescribed quantity into it.

"Don't go," said Beatrice. She swallowed the medicine, and got herself slowly and carefully down on the pillows, holding her breath, and they both waited, Rica in a perplexed whirl of terror, Beatrice hardly breathing, her face drawn with pain. Gradually the tension of her muscles relaxed, the red came slowly back to her lips, and she gave a slow, soft sigh of relief.

Rica knew she was better, and began to consider the situation with some degree of coherence.

"It isn't the first time," she thought fearfully; "she carries the medicine about with her, and she must have been pretty bad to scream like that. I do wish to goodness Geoffrey was back! He has no notion of this, I'm quite certain. This accounts, then, for the thinness—and other things. Sphinxyness is a depressing thing, and eludes one's insight; and, after all, what's any female creature without insight? —no higher than the brute beast. Ah, she's ever so much better!"

She watched her anxiously for a few minutes. The pain seemingly had gone, but it had left behind great weakness. Beatrice lay with her eyes closed, breathing softly, hardly perceptibly, indeed, but with a blessed look of relief on her face. At the beginning of the attack, in obedience to a sign from Beatrice, Rica had loosened all her clothes, and now that she had time to take notice she was shocked at the uncompromising salt-cellars in her neck, at the almost squalid flatness of her chest. It hurt the girl to see the poor shrivelled breasts. She covered them tenderly.

"She's all padding," she thought perplexedly, "and only a year or two older than I am. Oh, what is it all about? Good gracious! is it all wifehood and motherhood? It's

abominable; the biggest repentant sinner in London never got as thin as that in the time. It's only virtuous grief that ruins one's appearance." She gave a little shiver of dismay. "Does her neck worry her, I wonder? Is she small and human enough for that? It would kill me; but then I haven't—other things. I suppose they give necks and unconsidered trifles of the kind their proper value. I wonder," she went on, with the grotesque wildness which lonely grief sometimes brings to us, and that not even the presence of death can always stifle, "I wonder if grief ever thins men's legs? which, I suppose, in the scale of plump beauty, correspond with our necks. 'Paul drew up his trousers pensively and displayed his withered legs.' 'Alfred peered sympathetically, and wrung his friend's free hand.' Goodness! I'm getting distracted."

Beatrice moved and half rose. Rica put her hands gently on her shoulders.

"Beatrice, don't sit up; you can't be strong enough yet."

"Yes, I'm all right now, I am indeed. Shall we go to bed?"

"Yes. I'll ring for your maid."

Rica felt some unreasonable disappointment as she went to the bell. Was this all, then? Must she still keep on making miserable snap-shots at the truth? She was still grumbling over the matter, she hadn't even begun to undress, when Beatrice's maid came to the door and asked her to go to her mistress. She found her crouching over the fire; she always had a fire at night now that she felt the cold so keenly. Rica knelt down before it gladly. Her own fright had slowed her blood, and she felt cold besides with a vague, nervous fear.

"Oughtn't you to be in bed—mayn't I help you?"

"I like so much better to be here, and I want to talk to you. You're not tired, dear, are you? You look white for you. I'm afraid I gave you a horrid shock."

"I'm not an atom tired; but won't you wait till to-morrow, till you are quite strong?" An inexplicable fit of shy-

ness had fallen on Rica; she was dying to know all about it, and yet she felt an uncomfortable inclination to fly.

"I shall rest talking to you," said Beatrice. "I couldn't sleep just now." She put out her hand softly and laid it on Rica's. "It's nice to have a friend," she said gently. "I am so glad you came to stay with me."

"So am I. You're a good woman for a girl to know."

"Am I? Not to imitate though," she said, with an odd smile. "However, as your *cachet* is not imitation that doesn't matter. I surprised you to-night, which wasn't quite fair either to you or to friendship; but it is always so hard for me to speak out. Then I didn't know you well enough when I first was told; besides, it then seemed to be a crude ugly thing, about which one must be silent."

Rica was watching, in startled inquiry, Beatrice's quiet face looking into the fire. Suddenly she turned it on the girl and spoke in a hesitating way.

"I am very ill, Rica. I am so ill, indeed, that I can't live for very much longer now—not more than for a few months."

"Beatrice! Beatrice!"

Rica caught her in sheer horror, and gave her a little soft shake.

"What are you saying? What do you mean? Look at me."

She looked at the girl with surprised, half-fearful eyes.

"Rica, dear—I had no idea you would take it like this. I had settled it all with myself long ago. I never meant to shock you. There is nothing to be afraid of in death, in this slow, soft sort of death, that one has time to think about —nothing at all. The thought slips into your life and becomes part of it in a strangely short time. Just at first, of course, you lose courage, think that chaos has come, and that you are being unfairly dealt with, but that soon rights itself. Poor Rica, have I been selfish? I suppose it must seem dreadful to you, a girl, with a whole wide world to explore." She drew Rica's head down on to her lap.

"You're not two years older than I am," Rica whispered.

"Yes, but I'm different," she said softly. "I was never meant for an explorer, and unless you are in some degree equipped for that *rôle*, this modern life becomes rather a terror to you; you feel a little lost in it. You somehow can't blend with its *products*, and though you know it is entirely your own fault, or the fault of your limitations, you feel just a little lonely, a little in the way; and standing outside always makes you tired. I fancy, perhaps, that death and the things that lie beyond it, although we have ourselves clothed these in complications of mysteries, are really more simple than life. I think probably that is the reason I have now grown quite accustomed to the thought of death."

"Beatrice, are you sure of what you say? What is the matter with you?"

"There are three things, and all with long names. Two of them are hereditary. Yes, I am quite sure. I have been to the very best doctors; and, besides, I know it myself. Doctors only tell you the name your particular death goes by, and how it comes. I shall only suffer now and again. I am so glad—I have a cowardly fear of pain, and it is such a worry for other people. I may never have to be an invalid at all. Isn't that a good thing? After a certain stage it may come quite quickly."

Rica shivered, and took hold of the thin hand that rested on her knee and kissed it.

"Poor little Rica! nice, dear Rica! it is altogether delightful to have a friend."

"Geoffrey," said Rica,—"when will you tell him?"

"Oh, I wanted to speak of that. Not yet—not till I must. Perhaps I may not have to tell at all, you know; it might come first."

"But," said Rica, sitting up, and looking at her, "that isn't fair to Geoffrey."

"But why? His knowing could in no way alter things—ultimate things—for me."

"This going out—this living as if you were quite well."

"Won't alter anything by one finger's breadth. I do all

the doctors tell me. I never hurry for anything, or do any hard physical or mental work. I rest, and eat, and drink, and enjoy myself. Rica, don't you see that Geoffrey has been asleep—in abeyance, so to speak, since—Margaret Dering came? before indeed—since he married me; and now ——" She paused and moistened her lips. "Now he has awakened, and is making a fresh start in life. The knowledge of this must only retard, hamper, embarrass him, throw him perhaps quite off the line for ever so long, and he has already delayed too long. Besides"—she leaned eagerly forward,—"oh, Rica! I want to see him fairly on the way to the best he is capable of; we all expect so much from Geoffrey. I want to see him begin to justify our expectations before *it* comes. If he begins in sheer earnest he will go on, and then I should like to think that I had myself given him one little bit of stimulus forward. Something you and Mr. Colclough once said makes me believe I have been a help."

Rica stared at her wondering; she was looking into the fire with quiet serious eyes.

"It would be nice not to die till I could feel certain, quite certain, that he was going to be his best self—the best outcome of our honourable house. We must not retard him in any way; we must help him, hasten him on, that I may have even one visible evidence of his distinguished future."

"But you have it already in lots of little ways, and, above all, it's in your heart, dear," said Rica tenderly. "I'm sure your instinct is prophetic, as it was before about the election."

"I want it right under my eyes," she said softly. "In this shortness of time one grows greedy and grasping."

"Beatrice——"

"Wait, Rica, I have to tell you something. I overheard you telling Mr. Colclough about Margaret Dering's being alive. I was coming through the curtains into the inner drawing-room, and I simply stood there and heard all. I couldn't speak or move—I had just to listen. It was then,

too, that I heard you speaking of me. I am so glad you both think that I have helped Geoffrey."

"You knew it all the time!" ejaculated Rica. "I wonder——" She broke off and looked into the fire.

"You wonder if I was sorry," said Beatrice softly. "I was at first, as stupidly, and selfishly, and unreasonably sorry as a woman well could be. But I got reasonable later on. No one will ever be to him what she will be. No one will help him forward as she can do. Why should I grudge him to her? She told me it was my fault to have let him go—I had him first; and it was quite true. After all," she added softly, propping her chin on her palm, "if it is not she, it will be another, and I can trust HER. Rica, oh! Rica," she whispered, clasping her hands with restrained quiet force, "that is the bitterest thing of all! She has done such a great thing for him, and I so little—nothing definite or tangible, nothing steady and eternal like Margaret's sacrifice, that he can catch on to as to a sheet anchor. All that he will have to think of me by will be so vague and negative, such an élusive, ungraspable essence, that although it has done what it could, and he has felt its presence in a degree, yet it will soon drift away, float off into the shadows and be forgotten."

"Neither you nor your influence will ever be forgotten; you are unjust to yourself—and to Geoffrey, and to all of us. Whoever has lived with you would as soon forget your influence as one who has ever seen it would forget the shimmering, shadowy sheen of a pearl. Foolish Beatrice! you know as little of yourself as you do of other people. You have slid into our hearts in your prim little way, and nothing will ever crowd you out—not even Margaret," she added, rubbing her cheek softly against Beatrice's arm.

The elder woman gave a soft pleased smile, which in a few minutes died away, and a look of anxious worry troubled her tired face.

"What new thing has she to say?" Rica thought miserably, pushing up the loose sleeve and touching with her lips

the slender, fragile wrist, all little bones and blue veins. Beatrice shrunk a little away from her.

"Don't!" she said, "it's so sordid-looking; all the nice young flesh gone, nothing left but the sad old bones. That's the wretched part of it, Rica. You don't know how horrid it is to watch all the little outward things, the last touches, that make you pleasant in men's eyes, vanishing away, and leaving you a primitive initial sort of framework, that only depresses them and irritates them a little, makes them think that somehow you have failed in your day's work. In one's morning dresses it doesn't so much matter," she went on sedately; "padding is such a useful thing, and so long as your face keeps plump—mine has stood by me well in that respect—it is easily managed; but it is necks and arms that betray us. It was all right in the country, when I could wear tea-gowns, and just now they have managed my evening dresses admirably; but when Geoffrey comes back I hardly know what I shall do." She gave a sad little sigh. "He hates to see women's necks and arms muffled up—huddled away out of sight." She raised her proud little head. "And I don't wonder; it has a bourgeois, unassured sort of air that should not belong to us."

Rica looked at her troubled half-offended face, and she had to swallow a little foolish sob.

"Beatrice," she said, "can't you see that in this concealment you are dealing unfairly by Geoffrey? Can't you give up this double life and just rest and wear tea-gowns, and be foolish and hysterical, and cross and irritable, just when you feel inclined, and let us pet you and wait on you? Every new, disagreeable, natural little trait will only make you dearer to each one of us. And, Beatrice, if you must go away from us—not soon, as you say, but in some vague far future, which needn't interfere with our present—why not make the best of this present? Don't thrust Geoffrey out in the cold; let him love you, and think for you every minute in the day; you know how men like taking care of us——"

"*Oh, Rica!*" she broke in, with an odd, wan little flicker

of humour, "then why do you never give Mr. Colclough the chance? Let him turn the tables on you, just once in a while."

"That's altogether different. A man as careless of himself as he is must be looked after. But—I *will* say it, Beatrice, you are injuring yourself and Geoffrey in this. Lie about on sofas, and let him love you like any commonplace, foolish husband, and be happy, and stop making little of yourself."

A little quiet smile hovered about Mrs. Hyde's mouth for a minute.

"He does love me, dear; he loves me as a cousin, and neither shock nor service could alter the quality of his love, except in his own opinion. You are wise, my Rica, wiser than ever I should be, but there are some little things that I know which you don't." She stooped with a curious look and kissed the girl.

"Beatrice, you are aggravating to a degree. In one minute you confess to a limited view of things; in the next you persist in taking this view, when it's absolutely unsuited to the occasion. Can't you be accommodating?"

"I can't, that's one of my limitations. Rica, it must be just precisely as I say. Geoffrey shall not be hindered by me or by any one else. I mean to see him well on the way—and you must help me as much as ever you can; and, oh, Rica! I have had so many disappointments—I mustn't be disappointed in this; just to see Geoffrey well on his way—that's all I want."

"You'll get it all right, dear. He'll start fair, and you'll be there to see. But can't you possibly manage to take things easy, just to drift along in a nice pleasant pagan way?" she said coaxingly. "Throw your conscience overboard; you'd feel it an immense relief. and be as happy again. You could easily pick it up and put it back in its place, swept and garnished, if you felt an overpowering need of it. A conscience as strained with hard work as yours must be, is of no mortal use to any one. In any case, to *feel* your conscience is as bad as *looking* well-dressed; you should *be* these things, not *look* them."

"But things are so serious to me," said Beatrice. "Don't you think I would be light-minded if only I could? I have longed to be like you and Geoffrey, to give and take, to cease from striving, and drift, as you call it. It is just part of my make, of the stiffness of my mind—I can't."

"It isn't your make at all, I believe; it's your grandmother bringing you up to make a fetish of your conscience. She should have left you to nature, and you'd have gone just as straight. However, there's a time for everything, and the time has now arrived for you to shirk conscience and to take to massage, if you want at least to retrieve the character of your neck." Rica was determined she should rest and be taken care of now and again, in spite of herself, and a sudden idea had come to her. "I know a woman, a widow lady, who does massage for her living; she has two little sickly boys to keep. I'll get her to come for two hours every day after lunch, and I'll read to you while she massages, or whatever you call it. Your neck will soon need no muffling up, it can be as aristocratically bare as you like."

"Do you really think it will do good?" Beatrice asked, with great interest and a little doubt.

"I am positively certain it will," Rica pronounced.

"Then can you get her soon?"

"I can. I shall wire to her the first thing to-morrow."

"And now you must go away to bed, you will be so tired," Beatrice said; but she made no attempt to say good-night; she looked restlessly from the fire to Rica and shivered a little, clasping and unclasping her hands.

Rica felt desperately that if she didn't speak soon she herself must go away, the silence of the pause was too horrid. She wanted to walk about her room, to look out into the night, to do anything but watch this poor tired woman. Beatrice roused herself at last and sat up.

"I must see Margaret Dering," she said.

"Margaret Dering!"

"Yes, and tell her. She is so young. And that first *minute* I saw her singing by the stream, Rica, she made me

reel. She would have intoxicated any man. I have often laid awake at night, and been sorry. It was a dreadful thing to dash such happiness away from any girl! I must be the first to tell her. I want her in the future to have a pleasant memory of me—not for ever to think of me as a cold blight. She and Geoffrey must not have diametrically opposed views on any subject. She too must think a little tenderly of me, as of a dear dead cousin."

She spoke in a tired faint voice, and frightened Rica, who put on her best protective manner, took bodily possession of her, undressed her, and put her to bed. She watched her until she fell into a deep sleep of tiredness. When she got to her own room, she threw herself on her bed and went through a new experience. She had the first bad breakdown of her life.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ONE afternoon, a few days later, Margaret shut up her piano with an angry exclamation, thrust a book into a drawer, and went and curled herself up miserably in the corner of the sofa. She had tried to read, to practise a new song,—in a sudden spasm of youth she had even gone the length of attempting a German exercise; but she could do nothing at all but get herself into a most demoralised state of nerves.

She was all alone. Mrs. Bent was dozing in her own room, and Poll was of course at work. The "parlour" looked bright and dollishly pretty, with fragments of sun's rays breaking through the red blind, and a bee droned soothingly among the palms and ferns. One could easily have loafed and been happy in that room.

Margaret, however, had got Frank Weston on her mind, and could not rid it of him, or loaf, or do any sensible thing. He came to see her as he had always done, he often had tea with her and Mrs. Bent, and amused her as he used to do. He was the very best friend in all the world, helping her hourly and daily in all sorts of incidental ways, and he never so much as hinted at his desire to be any other thing—and yet, it was all different.

The little broken note made discord and hurt her, which is the one misfortune of having a fine ear. If she only could have done it—but then she couldn't! What was the use of going over old ground? This was a sensible cue; she took it, and veered off on another track, which landed her straightway down by the Derbyshire stream, waiting for *Hyde*. An Italian boy with an oddly unspoilt voice was

singing a little love-song just a few doors up. Margaret forgot Frank and the west central, her depressing handful of remnants, and her own utter incapacity to cope with them; she only remembered her dear foolish youth, and all it meant to herself. She sat straight up from sheer sudden joy in living, and joined her soft full contralto to the tender treble of the Italian, and shut her eyes. The sunbeams, grown stronger, played garishly over the fans and brought the present up too strongly.

When the Italian went round the corner, to begin again before the "pub.," Margaret still sang on softly to herself. Mrs. Bent, roused out of her half-sleep, stole on tiptoe to the door, and watched her, wondering if the Lord had any hand in this strange departure; but she shook her head sadly and returned rather perplexedly to her bed.

"Would to God it had been a hymn," she thought; "or that she could have brought her mind to take that dear young minister, sent along by Providence itself."

But the song, and the mystery of some hidden tone in the foreign words, set her too a-dreaming, and she fell to wishing for more amusing things for her young lady than hymns, and after a little gentle revelling among forbidden things even "the dear young minister" fell a trifle flat, and she began to flutter at higher game. Her old inbred peasant reverence for ancestral halls and fine worldly pomps got the better of her. She peered out through her glasses, approving the noble pose of Margaret's head, the unconscious pride of the way that even her hand lay on the sofa.

With a sudden revulsion of feeling an intolerable look of disgust spread over Mrs. Bent's face.

"Oh, and them girls to-night, their fringes and their colours—oh, mercy me! Lord forgive me, and I having resolved to leave it in His hands, and belittling His chosen minister too for worldly pomps; and—oh! there's some one coming!"

There was a soft silky rustling at the door, and a rather nervous double knock. Margaret sprang up with a start.

"It's Mr. Weston, of course!" she called out to Mrs.

Bent, who was scurrying into her cap and her best skirt. "Don't hurry, I'll open the door. I would have given any mortal thing he hadn't come to day," she thought. "I hope he won't find out what I've been thinking of, but no doubt he will."

The minute after she would have been glad enough if he could only have had the chance of finding out even the last thing in the world she wanted him to know, for, instead of his nice, ugly, re-assuring face confronting her at the door, she found the cold, handsome, fear-inspiring one of Mrs. Hyde.

She was too aghast to start back, or to do any other foolish, breathless thing. She stood still and waited, the brightness dropping off her face as she stood. Beatrice saw this, and it made things a little harder for her.

"Won't you ask me in?" she said, in her quiet, expressionless way.

"I beg your pardon," Margaret murmured, and, opening the door wide, brought her in, and pulled forward a comfortable chair for her.

The woman saw that the girl had grown enormously in finish and completeness. A horror of her own loss, of her squalid salt-cellars and the poor shabby arms hidden away under her lovely spring gown, took hold of her, and made it an effort for her to get herself into the chair. The girl saw that the woman had lost some great thing, but that she had gained some other thing that was greater. She was puzzled, and for the minute a little afraid. They couldn't possibly keep on breathing in this silence, Beatrice thought desperately. She leaned forward, and in her gentle, dogged, assured way, stepped right into the heart of the question.

"We all thought you had died, Miss Dering, some time ago. Your aunts believed it, and sent us the news. But a few weeks ago Mr. Colclough and Rica Weston found out that you were living here in London, and doing a very strange work among poor people. I overheard it all by an accident, and I have wanted to see you ever since. I told

Rica about it last night, and I felt to-day as if I must come. Miss Dering, it would be so kind of you if you would sit down. I know it is hard for you—I know quite exactly why you stand. Though," she added with a pale little smile, "we could neither of us explain in words why it is so. As a matter of fact," she said, with a touch of stiff dignity, "it is more difficult for me to sit and be at ease in your presence than it is for you in mine."

Margaret sat down directly, and by some unaccountable impulse drew her chair a little nearer to Beatrice's; but she couldn't speak for the life of her. She felt cold, and shocked, and full of wonder. She glanced once towards Mrs. Bent's room, and wished the old woman would come out, so that she might at least be within touch. She felt so lonely sitting there beside Geoffrey's wife.

"I am going to tell you just exactly what I want and why I came," said Beatrice.

Margaret gave a small sigh of relief; it was at least a comfort that she could keep silent. Beatrice looked straight before her, and went on in a low monotonous voice,—

"I robbed you once of a great joy. I fell by no fault of yours or mine as a blight on your life, and it is as such that you will always remember me." Margaret blushed hotly. "I want to change your attitude of mind in this respect by coming to you now with a little message of hope——"

"What can you—do you—mean?"

"There is no nice way of putting it," Beatrice said, half to herself. "I am ill," she said, looking quietly at Margaret, "so ill that I can't live more than a few months, and then after a little time it will be quite natural that you and Geoffrey should come to each other." She delivered herself of her little speech with the mechanical desperation of past resolves, and just as she had been preparing it for days past.

Margaret stood suddenly up, but her shaking knees forced her as suddenly down again. She felt a confused mass of amazement, horror, with just one little dash of shamefaced delight. She wanted to hide her face for ever from the

other woman, and yet she had to stare at her with parted lips and wide grey eyes.

"Can't you understand?" Beatrice asked softly; "are you so young still and so happy—you, who have suffered? Have you no understanding of the gentleness and simplicity of death? I could grasp Rica Weston's horror, I fear my suddenness seemed harsh to her; but you, who have in some measure trodden the same path as I—I cannot understand you."

"But," said Margaret in a low voice, "you have Geoffrey and your baby——"

"My baby died, and Geoffrey is my dear—*cousin.*"

Margaret looked at her, and she somehow understood the simplicity of death, and its charm. She was overwrought, and Beatrice's white serene face touched her strangely. Some mutinous foolish tears sprang into her eyes and overflowed. Beatrice smiled quietly.

"Don't, Miss Dering. I never dream of crying for myself, for, in fact, there's nothing to cry about. At the same time, I think I am a little glad to have seen those young tears of yours. I know now that you are not the least advanced, perhaps even one little bit old-fashioned. I am myself shockingly old-fashioned—not in a nice girlish emotional way, of course, but in a limited, rather prejudiced fashion; and when I heard from Rica about those persons you are good to, I was afraid you must be advanced, and altogether sure of yourself and of everything else, quite incapable of tears or any weak emotion—even capable of public speaking," she continued, with some prim severity, and with an involuntary protesting uplifting of one hand. "You don't go to any of those women's meetings, the reports of which I read in the papers, do you, Miss Dering?"

"I never was at a meeting in my life," said Margaret, laughing nervously—"except a Plymouth Brothers'."

"I am very much relieved to hear it. Geoffrey would so detest that kind of thing. He, too, is a little old-fashioned about women. How young you look!" she went on; "you look, too, like other girls, and you dress well. I am glad to

see you have learnt to do that, Geoffrey is so particular; yet——" she lifted her head and knitted her brows—"yet it hurts me to think that you, who will be with Geoffrey, should have been brought into quite close personal contact with such people. Don't you," she said, hesitatingly, "don't you find any difference in yourself?—do please forgive me; everything about you is of such consequence to me."

Margaret had acquired some capacity for observation while among her "persons"; she had been trying to grasp the character of Geoffrey's wife, but it confused her. She felt a funny sort of wish to kneel down before her, but at the same time a sudden hankering to kiss Geoffrey, and for the minute she was detestable to herself. She started from her pause.

"I do feel a difference," she said, in a low quick voice. "I may look young on the outside, but I have grown older. Things have got their proper values more than they used to have. It's their nice muddly jumble that helps to make up the delicious inexpressible delight of ignorance. Proportioning things makes one tolerant, no doubt, but tolerance doesn't make one in the least happier; there's disillusion at the bottom of it, and that's depressing. To know there's nothing all good and nothing all bad makes one older; I think perhaps it puts more fun into things, but it takes some joy out. Then the ordinary girl's division of people into two groups, good and bad, sheep and goats, is a big part in their happiness; it makes them feel so aloof from the goats, so nice and superior, giving quite an angelic twist to them as a body. It's humiliating, and a shock, and a good deal of a horror, to find how commonplace and alike we all are, and that we have no business at all on pedestals, looking over the heads of people, but should just step down and look into their hearts, and find ourselves there, ourselves and our little ways—primitive, and in the rough, of course, but us all the same. Oh, yes! it's a horrid shock to find that the line that keeps us apart is no unbending straight one, but very zigzag and flexible, and that, instead of pluming ourselves on our goodness, we should be blessing the

shepherds and the nice gentle dogs that keep us in our folds, and take care of the fences for us. Oh yes, I've grown older —there's a big difference in me. Do you mind? are you sorry? do you think less of me?" She stopped with a gasp at having put such questions to this woman.

"I don't understand," said Beatrice. "To me, life outside the fold, as you call it, seems impossible—or even any fellowship with it. But then I am, of course, limited. Your life has not injured you in any one of the ways I feared it might have done." She paused, and tried to feel altogether glad. "Nor will it hurt or offend Geoffrey——"

Margaret got up and stood over her, her face flushing painfully.

"Don't—don't speak like that again! To see you sitting there just as beautiful as you can—and in that lovely dress —and not much older than me—and talking—as if you were dead—is ghastly. You don't understand me. I understand some part of you still less. You seem to me wonderful and noble, but inhuman, and you make me also seem to myself inhuman. Of course I love Geoffrey—I can't help that any more than I can help breathing; but I don't want you to die that he may love me back," she said excitedly. "It seems like murder—it's a ghoulish, horrid thing!" She broke off shivering.

The echo of her old horror at her first experience of the girl's rushing speech swept back on Beatrice. She sighed and stirred in her seat.

"How young you are!" she said wearily. "If you do not understand, I fear I cannot explain myself. Potent words do not come easily to me. I have thought all this out so quietly, there is to me peace and calm in the contemplation of it. Death is a smoother of puzzles, a friend who arranges all things for us better than ever we could have arranged them for ourselves. Sit down and look natural again, Miss Dering," she said, with gentle command.

Margaret sat down, still staring at her.

"How odd it is that in this strange unnatural life of yours, among such sordid surroundings, you should still

keep that—that—wild-bird look is the only term that occurs to me! Ah, well, keep it—it is unjaded and alert, and will see round corners quite easily. Miss Dering, I am going to ask you to let me know you—to let me see you in all phases of your life. I want you to grow used to me, and then some day we may be able to take each other's hands and be friends. Don't you see, I want you and Geoffrey to remember me together. I want to carry myself on into your lives, and be a little everyday part in the lights of it. It is dreadful for me to think that Geoffrey should reach his happiness through the shadows of just an ordinary death. Then indeed my poor memory would be a ghoulish thing. You will let me know you, won't you?"

"Indeed, you may know me as much as you like, but let us forget death—at least, let us not speak of it, and then we can more easily get near to each other. Just now, you see," she said, nervously frowning, "I am afraid even to touch you. I feel as if I must speak low in your presence; you are an essence, a spirit, and I am used to such earthly people, it makes me feel eerie. If you know me," she went on more cheerfully, "you must know Mrs. Bent. She will be so glad to get any one so much on her side as to keeping within the fold and leaving alone those who have got into the open."

"I should like to know her; and—may I come to see those —persons?"

"You may—but you will hate it."

"But I will be growing a little into your life—making my memory inevitable," she added, smiling gently.

Margaret had stood up and was turning to call Mrs. Bent, when Beatrice stopped her with a gesture.

"First, I must say one more thing. I hardly think you can know Geoffrey altogether. You were so young. You may have seen his sweetness of nature—the inherent truth in him, his charm of manner; I can't think you can have grasped his potential possibilities. Geoffrey has it in him to go far, Miss Dering, but how far he will go will depend on his surroundings. He has been stagnant, so to speak, for a long time. Since he met you he has been shocked—para-

lysed—has done neither good nor evil, except of course to me—he has always been good to me. He's a gentleman, and could of course be no other. But he has now, I do think, fairly awakened and started on his career. He has entered Parliament, and is considering his future line. I do not understand the intricacies of his mind, Miss Dering, yet I know that his course will be honest and straight. But now, at the outset, he must not be retarded. Therefore, I think it would be better if he did not know of you yet."

Margaret flushed miserably, and began to say something. Beatrice stopped her.

"I trust my husband absolutely, please understand, Miss Dering; and you I also trust. It is that he may not be kept back—in any way distracted or hindered. We shall thus be helping him together consciously, and it will be the first real bond between *us*, won't it? our common anxiety for his success," she said with an odd wistfulness, "as before we have unconsciously hindered him."

Margaret turned away for a minute, then she put her hand timidly on Beatrice's shoulder.

"I am glad you came," she said; "you are a good woman for a girl to know."

Beatrice looked at her a little astonished.

"How curious! Rica said that too, and yet I seem to know so little in comparison with other girls. I feel beside them quite ignorant, a primitive, almost an obsolete type."

"I don't know anything of your 'other' girls, but there's nothing obsolete or primitive in a woman who makes you want to be good. I can't imagine any girl in the house with you ever forgetting to say her prayers."

Beatrice smiled softly.

"Who is Rica?" Margaret asked, taking her hand away gently, and feeling in consequence easier in her mind. It was unnatural to be so familiar with Geoffrey's wife.

"Rica Weston—a dear friend of mine; she is coming to see you."

"Oh, Mr. Weston's niece—I know quite well. I'll call Mrs. Bent."

She escaped, and she and Beatrice gave at the same moment a deep gasp of relief.

Mrs. Bent was overawed at first; her hands shook a good deal, till it gradually began to dawn on her that here was a woman who, however exalted she might be, had yet understandable instincts, who knew her place, and would as soon think of being "friendly-like" with "them girls" as she would of flying. Mrs. Bent mentally approved her inability and her make, and thanked her stars that Poll was out of the way. At the same time, it was a distracting afternoon; tea-time was upon them—Mrs. Bent already suffered from an inward craving; yet she must sit up straight and "converse." The fire was low, and every minute the milkman might appear with his customary yell. Mrs. Bent looked uncomfortably at the still woman, with all that nice, befitting, proper pride about her, and trembled at the consequences. There, sure enough, was the "milk" only a door up; there were men's voices too, and a knock.

"It's the rent," she thought wretchedly, "and he must come in, and the receipt and all—mercy on us! and her that unaccustomed. I'll go, Miss Margaret," she cried, distractedly hurrying out, ashamed to the marrow of her bones.

It was such a blessed relief to find only Mr. Weston and his friend that she beamed on them in so heavenly a fashion that Colclough got quite a start. She then signed frantically to the young man with the cans to contain himself, and whispered, to the blank astonishment of the men,—

"Mrs. Hyde is calling on my young lady."

"We were coming to tea," said Frank. "You'll not want us now."

Mrs. Bent straightened herself up. She was not in such a very small way as to be unable to receive three visitors.

"We shall be most pleased, sir, me and my young lady. Like enough you are acquainted with her visitor."

"We know her well; said Frank and—Mrs. Bent, I'm going for the jug—you mustn't dock that young man of his howl any longer."

The three went into the room with mixed sensations,

Mrs. Bent with a stiff back and an exaltation of spiritual pride. It did her heart good to welcome a minister of God to company as befitting as this. The very way Mrs. Hyde sat gave the place an air, and wiped out the memory of "them fringes." But it was the faint violety smell about her that especially impressed the old woman, for it was the one thing she scored over Margaret in, and Mrs. Bent resolved to get to the bottom of it. For one audacious moment she thought of making bold to ask the lady herself, but on closer inspection she found the effort beyond her. She then determined to get Frank to dig out the secret. She would take good care that her darling should smell the same. She had the same right as the best of them. Otherwise she considered that Margaret did credit to her "breeding."

She suddenly saw Mrs. Hyde's eyes shining softly on her as she was speaking to Frank and Colclough, and something in her face made Mrs. Bent speak her thoughts aloud.

"I think, ma'am, you approve of my young lady—you who knows and lives in your born station, as is but right and proper. I thank you, ma'am, humbly. May I make bold to inquire, ma'am, what *you* think of the way my young lady spends her time?"

Beatrice answered with a frank responsiveness that astonished herself.

"I don't understand it the least bit, and it frightens me rather. Do you know, I fancy I feel about it a little as you do."

There was a helpless little smile about her mouth as she spoke, and Mrs. Bent could have told you her age to a day. Hitherto she had mentally treated her as about the same age as herself.

"Dear young madam!" she murmured with all the authority of one who has looked at life for five-and-seventy years.

Beatrice stood up to go the minute after.

"But you'll stay to tea?" said Margaret. "Mrs. Bent, haven't you asked her?"

Beatrice wondered breathlessly if she could. She ought

to see her from all sides; she even ought to break bread with her.

"I will," she thought; "I shall then be less inhuman to her, and it will be a nice cosy memory for Geoffrey, with no foolish melodrama about it." "Mrs. Bent hasn't asked me," she said smiling, "but I think she will let me stay." She sank back in her chair, glad to rest again. Her heart just then was hurting her a good deal.

Mrs. Bent stood up.

"Sit down again directly," said Margaret; "you are the hostess, and have to sustain the conversation. I shall get tea."

"Mrs. Bent," said Frank, "don't be the least uneasy; we'll help her. Miss Dering, Mrs. Hyde, is an excellent organiser in large concerns, but she fails in the retail line. She has an unfortunate tendency to forget details, such as sugar, butter on the toast, and so on. The last time she got tea she gave us one spoon between three of us and the sugar."

"Perhaps you'll leave reminiscences and make some toast," said Colclough from the kitchen door.

Talking to the old woman had a healing, tranquilising effect on Mrs. Hyde. When tea came she drank it, and almost forgot her trembling, nervous horror lest it should choke her. What troubled her most at first was the strange stillness in Margaret's fresh young voice, and her paleness. Yet she talked and laughed, and no girl of her age could have behaved better.

"After all," Beatrice thought, with a stately uplifting of her head, a gesture of unconscious pride that nothing but race can ever bestow upon a woman, "she could look none other but pale, and a stillness must have crept into her voice. She has self-control, and she can take sorrow as he does. He will never any more have to suffer dull, sad, lonely grief, and he will not be hurt by watching it. But will she ever love him as I do? can she or can any one else? Ah well, perhaps quantity has nothing to do with it. I don't understand—perhaps a man does."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

By the time that Geoffrey was expected home from Ireland, Rica had arranged her daily massage for Beatrice's neck entirely to her own satisfaction. She saw very clearly that the two hours' rest and the cloud of hope that hung around it was a tremendous help to the tired woman. Without saying a word of it to any one, she gave up many small plans of her own to be with Beatrice always at this time, to read to her and amuse her. In revenge, she tyrannised over her in a perfectly audacious way. However, as Beatrice liked it, that mattered not at all.

Rica's ideas of the fitness of things got some strong shocks from another quarter about this time. There was no doubt about it, Colclough was growing bumptious, and no longer took screens in the spirit of meekness. Moreover, he refused sheltered corners to sit out in and insisted on dancing whenever he was disposed that way—but only with her, which she felt was at least to his credit. One day, almost to her amazement, she noticed that he was distinctly fatter and looked quite frivolously young, and that for one whole evening he had not once coughed. He had, besides, twice intercepted her as she had gone, from mere reflex action, to shut a window behind him; the last time with a laugh and a whispered jibe that made her go the length of blushing.

When he had gone away that night she felt rather sad and lonely, as if somehow he were slipping out of her hands, more or less, as each of her brothers had done in turn; but then they had always slipped out of her hands into another girl's. She was stooping down to write a postcard when this thought struck her. She paused, with a disagreeable chill down her back, to reconsider it, and when she lifted up

her head again, her eyes shone with alertness and a fixed purpose.

Meanwhile, she, Beatrice, and Margaret had come to see a good deal of each other, and to understand a little. Beatrice had not yet been able to summon up courage to venture herself among the "persons," and the sudden incursion one day of Poll had been an appalling shock to her—though, indeed, Poll's behaviour had been stiff with decorum, and she had hardly recovered from the experience for a week. She was, indeed, discovered by Mrs. Bent one morning, when she should have been getting herself ready for church, practising Mrs. Hyde before the glass, with a strained look of agony on her countenance, and a thick coating of flour on her cheeks.

"Beatrice," said Rica, the day before they expected Geoffrey, "it was all very well for me to sponge on you while your husband was away, but it will be different now."

"But, Rica, I want you; and don't you see there won't be time for us to get tired of each other?"

"Look here, Beatrice, stop that ghastliness—you know it's forbidden in this well-regulated establishment. But you'll be tied here till August, and I don't mean to be a millstone round the household's neck till then. I'll tell you what I want you to do. I shall live at home, but I want you to keep my dear little room for me here free for me to fly to, as to a city of refuge, whenever my step-mother becomes too monstrous a bore. And I mean always, whether you wish it or not, to be present at each massage, or the widow woman will soften your brain with infant anecdote. How she can reel them out with such complacency about two such children as hers is beyond me. Is the average mother made without a conscience? or is she blind, or an idiot?"

"Dear Rica, she thinks they're nice."

"Then she would show ever so much more appreciation of her blessings if she provided them with handkerchiefs. Practicality appeals to me more than sentiment where little boys' noses are concerned." She lifted her own with a sniff.

"You like your children grown up, Rica. The worst of grown-up children," she went on sedately, "is that they will kick over the traces now and again, and sometimes even altogether reverse the rightful order of things."

Rica looked at her, and thinking to herself that she was getting too sharp altogether, she went into the conservatory for some roses. When she came back, Beatrice had on her dogged-resolution air, and her upper lip had lengthened.

"Rica," she said, "I think I shall go soon to one of Miss Dering's Evenings. Geoffrey and Mr. Colclough are going on Thursday to that big dinner; shall we go then?"

"Yes, and get Frank to go with us; and, Beatrice, I can see quite plainly you're making a nightmare of this thing. You must give up this attitude of mind. Margaret wouldn't look as she does if it were altogether so gruesome."

"But she is—so human, so many-sided. She thinks of these persons as girls with hearts and souls and bodies like her own, only differently arranged—and ordered; and I—" she shivered and drew her wraps around her with a self-respecting gesture—"I shall not be able to consider their hearts in the least; I shall only be able to think of their fringes and their wild eyes, as Mrs. Bent does, and of themselves as most dreadful sinners."

"And your look as you do so will have a most chastening influence upon them, and will do them a world of good."

Geoffrey was genuinely glad to see his wife again. He had thought of her several times during the night on his way from Holyhead, and wondered, with a half-smile, how her lip would look, and if her eyes would have returned to their monotony.

He found her waiting for him by the breakfast-table, in a cool grey dress, and with her eyes shining.. It struck him forcibly that he had rarely seen a more restful-looking woman. He gave her a longer kiss than he had done since his marriage. He watched her all through breakfast and found that she had not relapsed into monotony, but was *newer than* ever; and a certain something in her, hidden

away from him, quickened his interest and gave zest to his curiosity.

"You seem to have done a tremendous lot," he said, helping himself to more ham. "I thought you meant to rest, as you can't get away as early as usual this year?"

"I rested between whiles. I like going out with Rica."

"How's Jim?"

"He's given up coughing, and he defies draughts and Rica," she said, with a low laugh.

"Oh! How does she take his new character?"

"A little restively, I think."

"She'll knuckle down in time, and like it. Colclough will have the whip-hand, of course, but you'll find she has too much grit; she's too strong to resist after the first shock. She'd despise a fellow at once if she found herself the better man."

"But," Beatrice said, looking puzzled, "I thought it was the strong ones who were crying out for the higher place."

"Oh, no, it's the nerveless, strong-lunged ones," he said absently, watching her pouring out his tea.

"They're both coming to dinner."

"Yes. Beatrice, you're growing young, and I fancy a little foolish; I had better make a practice of going now and again to Ireland for a month."

Her mouth trembled with a smile; she said nothing, but she stood up, and brought him his tea; then she went back to her seat, and told him about some of her balls, and Rica's baronet. But he liked her best in her silences. The note of striving and pain that had always irritated him had gone from her; she had created round her a new, rare atmosphere, and it was an odd sort of pleasure just to rest in it, and wish to be good.

"Beatrice," said Rica, when they were in the drawing-room after dinner, "have you found out all about the Irish journey?"

"No, dear."

"I was bursting to ask all through dinner, but I thought it might have some Radical empire-uprooting meaning, un-

fit for servants' ears and morals. I believe it has too. Geoffrey has such a singularly mild and heavenly expression of countenance; he invariably has when he's bent on earthquakes."

"Geoffrey, are you going to tell us all about it?" said Beatrice, in an unhesitating, familiar way that was a shock to both of them.

"I'll tell you all I know myself, which is at present uncommonly little," said Geoffrey cheerfully. "I went over to look at Ireland if possible from a new point of view, and I looked at an infinitesimal part of it—that's all."

"All right, go on," said Colclough.

"Well, you see, since my callowest youth, the astonishing waste of inches in stature and breadth of chest all through England, Ireland, and Scotland has struck me forcibly, and I have pleased myself for many years with imagining what consistent discipline and a martial spirit throughout the land would do for it; and out of my imaginings I have constructed a sort of conscription-scheme, altogether crude and initial, but it could be developed practically. Since I saw you, I have been living about in villages—anyhow. Fortunately all the hens were laying well, and there was bacon, or I should have starved. And I really flatter myself I found out something."

"What were the different characters you were known by?" Colclough asked.

"They varied. The Protestants had one list, the Catholics another. To the former I was a Jesuit priest, an Irish American dynamitard, a spy paid out of Mr. Gladstone's private purse, a Liverpool agent to buy up cheap Irish properties and pedigrees. One old lady heard I came over to buy up ancestral lace for a London firm. She sent me a royal command to appear before her."

"Did you go?" Rica asked.

"Oh yes, I went. She was a delightful old lady. I did all I could to explain myself, but she had got one idea on her brain—lace—and she kept a firm hold on it. She told me to stick to business, and keep my highfalutin notions to

myself. That was all the good I got by going after counterfeit articles into foreign Papist places, with hundreds of born and bred Irish ladies ready to my hand with whole boxes full of real, yellowing, unmistakable lace to dispose of, that had been in their families for generations."

"How much did you buy?" Rica asked, with deep interest.

"A bag full. The bag was made of red stuff with black pips on it. She was very good. She gave me a present of six fresh eggs in a paper bag, and warned me against drink and the Pope."

"Beatrice, I daresay," said Rica, "that lace is a great bargain. Such a nice, thoughtful old lady wouldn't cheat."

"The extent of the bargain depends on the value of holes. The lace is full of them. But its ancestral state was the avowed feature of that lace. I had to carry the bag and the eggs through a row of servants—who were also ancestral to an alarming extent; and when I got out into the drive I met a yellow chariot with three pretty girls in it. I would have offered them the eggs, but, as soon as they saw the bag, they uplifted their noses haughtily. They had recognised it, and they felt that there was trade in the air."

"Beatrice, do send for that bag, and we can look at the lace while Geoffrey tells us the rest."

"Vanity, thy name is woman," Colclough muttered. "And the affairs of the three kingdoms at stake!"

Geoffrey caught him on the shoulder with the *Spectator*, and told a footman to fetch the bag.

"Oh, Geoffrey," said Beatrice, turning an eager face on him, "do go on."

"Oh yes, go on," mumbled Rica from the floor, with her mouth full of pins, spreading out Beatrice's skirts to display the lace on them. "It was simply a dispensation of Providence," she remarked, "that you should wear black velvet to-night."

Beatrice still looked towards her husband, and wondered a little irritably at Rica's frivolity. It would have astonished her very considerably to be told that old lace appeals

more powerfully than any other detail in religion and ethics to the very highest nature of woman. Hyde watched his wife's attitude with a little surprise. It flattered him, but he hadn't a notion why it did so. He had a simple soul, and failed to understand that for a husband to be considered before lace at the fag end of the century is the most superb compliment that has yet been paid to a man.

Colclough, however, had got hold of the situation. He gasped slightly, and admired Mrs. Hyde, but he understood better the crick in Geoffrey's neck, and felt a sudden glow of good fellowship as he looked at Rica sitting at Beatrice's feet, with her eyes alight with the joy of her find.

"Nothing like Nature," he told himself, and turned to listen cynically to Geoffrey.

"I got over the Protestant prejudices easily enough," he was saying, "but those of the Catholics—natives to the soil—were more of a nuisance. In every part I had to go through the phase of being an emigration agent, an insurance person, and so on. The originality, the power, the ingenuity in the matter and manner of the lies of the Irish peasantry would confer distinction on any nation. No other people touches them in this respect. Of course I speak of the art as practised by the Celt on the Saxon. Among themselves, they just lie rationally and as a matter of course—as we do in other parts. Until you're fully convinced of this fact, you'll learn nothing of the Irish or their opinions. You'll not surprise them with the truth either, for they're a wary folk. You'll just have to get behind their veil of romance by hook or by crook."

"Well, what did you learn?" said Colclough, in an anxious-for-information voice.

"I learnt *that*—which is more than some politicians have learnt in some centuries."

"Curiosity-exciting persons, just like women," grumbled Colclough. "We'll never get quit of them in that case, Home Rule or not."

"Conscription would break the habit of romance if anything would; requiring, as it does, leisure for its cultivation,

and a congenial sod. Prompt obedience to short commands is what the fellows want, with neither time nor opportunity for arguing the matter, or even for remembering the nationality of the man in command. The loyalty and efficiency of Irish regiments is an old story, and there's the making of the finest army in Europe in the country parts in Ireland. Besides, they're tormented with the martial spirit. At the merest hint of an uprising, see how those big fellows go, night after night, after their day's work, on low diet, to drill, although the drilling field may be miles away. You see the spirit of war in their very walk. Then look at their faction fights; their love for noise, and colour, and display; their delight in posing in the face of the world; and the devotion of Irish women to any cause that brings their men before the public eye."

"Fine scheme," said Colclough, smiling at the warm lighting up of Beatrice's cold face, "most practicable! How would the Irish Leaders regard it?"

"Fight it tooth and nail."

"And the priests?"

"Do likewise."

"Such a scheme must apply equally to the whole kingdom."

"Certainly; but I thought that Ireland, being the feminine portion of the kingdom, should be considered first. Besides, my more immediate object would be to assist in putting the extinguisher upon the impossible mania they call 'Home Rule'; but Home Rule is so obviously right and moral from an Irish point of view, and so absurdly wrong and immoral from an English, that unless we can hide both these smaller nationalities beneath the greater name 'British,' and bind the two peoples together, if not by a common love for each other, then by a common hatred of outsiders, there is no remedy."

"What about the liberty of the subject?" interjected Colclough.

"There is or should be none when the common weal is at stake. But I would render my scheme less obnoxious by

making Militia service compulsory, lengthening the term, and making it an unbroken one. Then look for one moment upon the moral influence it would have upon the people. There would be fewer young marriages, far less poverty, and a year or two of firm control would add infinitely to the individual worth of labourer, artizan, and shopman."

"You speak of all ranks," put in Rica. "You surely do not mean to include the boudoir young man?"

"Don't I? The discipline would do wonders for him—put him into condition, keep him out of mischief, and restore him from his lap-dog state of mind."

"Rather hard on the sensitive instincts of the mute inglorious poet," said Colclough.

"Their want of physique would save that crowd," exclaimed Geoffrey, with cheerful brutality, "and the stronger ones among them might grow more virile in their literature by a pleasing round of enforced duty."

"But gentlemen's sons!" objected Beatrice, in sympathetic horror.

"I should be sorry for the minor poets," said Rica; "for after all a man can no more help his mind's poetic tendencies than he can his red hair; but to watch the boudoir young man being put into condition would be a heavenly pastime."

"What about the interests of morality?" asked Colclough.

"How do they stand at present throughout the land? If the evil is in a man, nothing brings it to the surface better than a soldier's training; and surely it is better that it should come to a head at once, and be disciplined out of him, than lie gathering strength in him, to burst forth some day upon a child, it may be, or on some weak woman. Two years' firm discipline must knock some of the brutality out of a man, whatever else it may do or fail to do."

"He'd learn the value of public opinion any way," put in Rica. "That's something."

"Yes; and nothing makes a better citizen of a man than *to know that* he himself is an important and efficient unit

in the making of a nation. You can't get that into a man who is a ploughman, or a shopman—and nothing else."

"And the picturesqueness it would bring into the spirit of the whole country!" said Rica. "Beatrice, we should be no longer a nation of shop-keepers—now hug that fact to yourself; no longer bourgeois to all the other nations of the earth."

"Oh!" said Beatrice, taking a puzzled look round.

"And think of the good fellowship it would bring about among our classes. You'll find no wholesomer mixture of ranks than in a good regiment. One class leads, the other follows, and they're the best of friends. The one class at once recognises that the other is most capable of organisation, and accepts the position rationally—or it used to do so when our army was our pride. A nation that relies, as ours does now, on the conscripts of hunger, officered by crammer boys, to maintain its rights and its honour, will maintain neither for long."

"That's very nice," said Colclough; "but what of the expense to the nation of the other thing?"

"It would be no great tax on the nation to select its finest young men of *all* ranks to be trained for a year or two in the Militia, which must of course be officered by men retired from the regular army. The half-pay officers could earn their pay by teaching the Militia. Besides, it will pay any nation in the long run to better the quality of its men, as regular training must do. Another thing, it will help the ordinary young rustic to the pluck that our boys have by inheritance and training. Compare the boys at an ordinary school-treat with the fellows at any public school, and see if they don't need the discipline and the hard condition the Board School is too mawkish and too full of flabby sentiment to give them."

"If you descend to school-treats, of course," said Colclough.

"They're excellent institutions for taking observation on the young of the classes."

"Geoffrey," said Beatrice anxiously, "it seems to me

that one could make so much more progress, could so much more readily obtain a hearing, on some subject that had already the sanction of the public voice. On, for instance, some long-standing public abuse."

"That wouldn't be half the fun."

"Fun!" she repeated, opening her eyes.

"Besides," he asked, "isn't Ireland a long-standing enough abuse for you."

"It may be years before you make any progress in such a new way of thinking of Ireland."

"It may be years before I know enough of the subject to lift up my voice towards its advancement."

Her sudden paleness surprised and rather irritated him.

"Oh Lord, how her intensity bores me!" he thought. "Can't she attend to the lace? What has she on her mind?——While I'm getting up modified conscription and making friends with the population," he said, aloud, as a sort of immediate satisfaction to her, "I have another idea on my mind."

"Upon my word," said Colclough, "you'll be the biggest bore in the House before you're five years older."

"If I am, you may congratulate me, Beatrice. I shall have every hope of getting something through, and will have justified my existence in your sight. My wife has a solid belief in action," he explained to Rica; "and a man who acts to any purpose in Parliament must be a bore. He must be a one-, or at most a two-idead man, and keep pegging away at his hobbies, in season, and out of season, until he has made himself a bye-word in the land."

"What's the second idea?" Beatrice asked.

"The immorality of Public Examinations."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean a good many things. I'll tell you two of them. I mean that exams. are snares and delusions in that they are self-regarding objects, and promote selfishness. They concentrate the energies on doing instead of growing. They foster the intellect at the expense of the emotions. They *substitute* book-knowledge for knowledge acquired directly

through the senses, and tend to impair the senses by disuse. That is, you read about a thing instead of seeing it, you pick it up in two dimensions instead of three, and go through life a dimension short; which means that you can dream, but not, properly speaking, imagine."

Beatrice regarded him with intense satisfaction. It was delightful to her to know that Geoffrey could excel in seriousness as in other less beautiful things.

"It would be such a big thing to meddle with," she said solemnly.

"You see, I'm young, and we're a long-lived family. I have ample time in which to make myself a nuisance. One can sometimes set a ball or two rolling in the right direction in a lifetime."

"A lifetime!" said Beatrice, with a wan look at him.

"My dear girl, you couldn't do anything in less. What about the lace?"

Beatrice sighed unsatisfiedly, but catching Rica's eyes fixed warningly on her, and hearing from the floor a sepulchral mutter, to the effect that things were all right, and that she had better hang conscience and look at the lace, she brightened herself up and began to examine it with some surprise, while Rica sat where she was, and greedily drank in its excellence.

"How much did you give for all that lace, Geoffrey?" his wife asked.

"Twenty pounds. Was that right?"

"It's worth a hundred. Do you know her address?"

"Yes—why?"

"I must send her the rest to-morrow."

"But," said Colclough, "I thought no woman could pass a bargain."

"In this case that would be cheating," she replied, with a prim rebuke in her voice. "Gentlewomen don't cheat."

Colclough laughed softly. He was glad to notice that although Rica laughed too, her eyes rested softly on the other woman.

"One feels rather horrid keeping it at all from those three girls," Beatrice said, examining the quality.

"Now," said Rica, "that's where Beatrice's nasty spiritual pride comes in. It was nice and dear of her to give the proper amount for the things, but to wish them back to girls who mended them like this—see! It's too much for the carnal mind. Beatrice, be as angelic as you like, but don't be a prig."

"Perhaps," said Geoffrey deprecatingly, "an ancestor did that mend—they were awfully pretty girls."

"An ancestor!" retorted Rica, with a shrill uplifting of her voice. "Women with lace like this in their family were dainty, delicate creatures who would as soon have thought of mangling a piece of lace as of drinking a whisky-and-soda. A generation that can mend lace of so high a quality as villainously as this," she said tragically, holding out a cobble, "has no respect for ancient institutions, and its highest instincts are in abeyance."

"That reminds me," said Colclough, "we'll just have time for a game of billiards before you go to this dance. You shouldn't spring higher instincts on us this time of night, Miss Weston; it's a shabby trick."

CHAPTER XL.

WHEN Margaret got a note from Rica to say that she and Beatrice were coming on the Thursday evening, she was filled with dismay. She passed the note on to Mrs. Bent, who read it with a melancholy head-shaking, and several interjections of woe, which had the effect at last of finding Margaret's tongue for her.

"Mrs. Bent," she said, half angry, half amused, "you're always a dear, scriptural old person, but this time you've chosen to impersonate a most unpleasant character. You're a Job's comforter, that's what you are. Come back at once into the New Testament, and help me, like a Christian."

"Miss Margaret, dear, it's that Caroline. The state of health of that poor young madam ain't fit to cope with such. Poor Poll, and the foolish hussies 'll disgust her, no doubt, make her that sick—they'll hurt her daintiness. But that young woman, *she'll* hurt her heart. She's too ill, dear, to be let learn that such as her breathe."

"She knows she will be hurt, and yet she is resolved to come; and—Mrs. Bent, I want Caroline to know that such as Mrs. Hyde breathe."

Mrs. Bent drew herself up.

"My darling, she knows you."

"That's just it—she *knows* me. It is because she could never know Mrs. Hyde that I want her to see her. She will be to her like a being from another world who has always lived in some higher, rarer atmosphere. The chill she carries round her from those higher levels, the very look of her—her far-off air—her constitutional unfitness—for—'the touchings of things common,' will arrest Caroline's quick

wits. She will have seen absolute crystal purity, quite unable to understand any other state of mind, for the first time. Caroline will remember her and think her over. She'll hate it, but she'll do it all the same."

"Dear heart," said Mrs. Bent, tenderly watching her, "you are as pure as any crystal, and yet you nestle homely in our hearts. That is the goodness of Christ, child."

Margaret knelt down and put her head in her lap.

"It's different altogether, Mrs. Bent. Do you know, it's terrible sometimes to see things in other hearts, and to know that in your own there are just the same things, if you gave in to them. I would give anything to be absolutely spotlessly ignorant again—to be lifted up above all knowledge of myself and of evil, and of ugly common things—just to be a beacon set aloft pointing to the light, as Mrs. Hyde is, as all good women should be."

"You have chosen the better part, dear," said Mrs. Bent, gently stroking her head. She understood and approved of her more than she had ever done before, but she had no words to express herself.

"I haven't even that consolation—it chose me," came in a melancholy murmur from Mrs. Bent's lap.

Margaret still kept her head there. It was pleasant to be stroked and soothed; the touch of the old hands gave her a nice feeling of extreme youth and irresponsibility. Suddenly Caroline's well-known knock made them both start up. Margaret fled to wash her face; Mrs. Bent smoothed her apron, and with marked grimness admitted her unwelcome guest. Caroline waited for Margaret, taking only the very smallest notice of the old woman or her grimness. When Margaret came in, she glanced with a cynical smile at her eyes.

She was in a distinctly nasty humour.

"I came to tell you that I should come on Thursday," she said.

"Yes," said Margaret. "I'm very glad."

The other laughed.

"You don't look it. Oh, don't pull yourself up and go back on your attitude."

Mrs. Bent felt she could not possibly stand any more of the young woman. She took up her Bible, and involuntarily holding it before her like a breast-plate, she marched protestingly into the kitchen. Caroline laughed again and threw herself into the vacated arm-chair. She made a point of ousting Mrs. Bent from it whenever she possibly could.

"Old lady's on her high horse. How sick to death you must get of women—such specimens too! An uninterrupted course of any womankind indeed is a terror to think of. It must weaken the mind, blur the instincts, hopelessly falsify one's values, distort the mental vision, and so on. I suppose women do observe keenly, but what's that if they can't sort the results? You'll have to quit this life."

"I will directly I feel all these things coming on me. I have got to know one woman lately who isn't so complicated in her effects on one—indeed, I don't know any words that express quite neatly what her effect is. You'll understand when you see her. She's coming on Thursday."

"May we lay claim to this distinguished personality?"

"No."

"Is she to be trotted out, then, for our good—a 'word in season' for her 'fallen sisters'?"

"No. She would consider that sort of thing exceedingly underbred and interfering. Besides, she couldn't for the life of her understand anything about fallen sisters.

"A saint, then, or a fool!"

"An absolutely good woman, who has never had to strive for her goodness."

"God help her husband!"

"Caroline, the sight of this unknown life will be a shock to Mrs. Hyde, and her shock will hurt me horribly. Will you try to lessen it? Will you be your very nicest self, and talk to her and make it less unnatural for her? You and Mrs. Bent are the only ones I have to depend on."

"I and Mrs. Bent! What a coupling!"

"Will you help me?"

"If she's craving for the truth, why not let her learn it?"

"She has no craving for this sort of truth. Didn't I tell you she could in no sort of way understand it? All you could do would be to fill her with vague horrors, half of them unreal, and hurt her in all her tender places. It would be a mean sort of cruelty; no *man* would be capable of it."

Caroline lifted her head angrily. "She is in society, this woman?"

"Yes."

"And is still lifted so high above the truth? Good Lord! What brings her here?"

"She wants to see me in my life."

Caroline flung a keen look at her.

"All right," she said, rising, after a pause. "I'll be most genteel. Mrs. Bent and I will do the honours, cheek-by-jowl. She, no doubt, will enjoy the connection."

She went off wondering a good deal about Mrs. Hyde, and with a fixed resolve to find out her relationship to Margaret.

By the time Thursday arrived, the diligent damsel, who had excellent ways and means of finding out most things, once her curiosity was raised to the proper point, had several clues to the position, and only needed a hint or two for its complete elucidation.

On the Thursday afternoon Mrs. Bent cloaked and bonneted herself and departed on some mysterious expedition of her own, returning in an hour or so triumphant. Margaret wondered what the mystery meant, but was much too busy with her own arrangements to let it dwell on her mind. When she was changing her linen dress for a pretty crêpon one she often wore in the evening, Mrs. Bent came into her room with a bottle preciously held in both hands.

"Miss Margaret, dear, I want you to put some of this—not on your handkerchief, dear, but to rub it into your neck."

Margaret stared at her in astonishment.

"*It's* violets, my dear, the same as the young madam

uses, and that's how the ladies applies it, so the young person at the shop told me."

"But, you dear, this cost a fortune; and I'm not in society."

"Miss Margaret, I don't intend that there young woman, that Caroline, to know that you're in any way behindhand. She's that sharp, she'll smell Mrs. Hyde the minute she comes into the room, and she shall smell you too, dear, the dead moral of the lady. I can't help the poor, homely house, and the poor sticks of furniture, but the little things as touch yourself must be attended to, with quality coming to see you; and besides, it'll help that Caroline to keep her place. It goes to my heart, dear," she said, as she began gently to rub in the scent, "to think as how that purty neck should be hid away. It's its place to be seen, dear. It's a queer thing too," she added reflectively, "that one looks for the sight of the gentlefolks' necks—one expects it of 'em—and yet even an inch of the same exposed to view in one of our own girls makes a body's fingers itch to box the hussy's ears. Dear, must you hide it all up? One little bit of the frock turned in now, and a nice white streak for us to look at."

Margaret kissed the nice, anxious old face.

"It wouldn't do; you know in your heart it wouldn't."

Mrs. Bent sighed.

"No, dear, perhaps not. One little drop on your hair, Miss Margaret! I noticed it on hers."

Margaret knelt down while she put it on, then she sprang up.

"I feel lovely," she said. "I smell like a violet-bed, and I feel—just like a nice, folded-lamb girl, who sees only the delicious outsides of things, and doesn't even know insides exist. I'm going to sing now and keep up the delusion; it's bewilderingly nice. Myself is a miracle to me, and you've worked it, Mrs. Bent. I'll tell you a secret. Do you know, my one ambition is to go to a ball and wear a real low-bodiced dress, and for you to see me in it. My neck and arms are pretty, aren't they? Never mind, you've told me

they are scores of times. Now think of me as I sing, all violety, and in a lovely low dress."

The entrance of a large handful of her remnants brought her soon back to the insides of things. Presently Caroline arrived, looking prim and sly, and amazingly handsome. She was dressed in a severely plain quakerish gown, with a white lace fichu knotted loosely over her fine bust. Margaret sighed resignedly; she saw she was beyond her interference—she would do precisely what the devil suggested to her to do. A huge wave of excitement swept over the room when Beatrice, Rica, and Frank appeared in it. The girls bridled and prinked themselves with a lordly disdain of observation. Beatrice at once took refuge beside Mrs. Bent, and the two made vague efforts to forget the nature of the guests.

Beatrice's reluctant eyes followed Margaret's every moment, her nervous ears listened for every word she spoke. Presently Rica came up, and to Beatrice's astonishment she looked frightfully alert, and particularly well pleased with herself.

"Oh," she said, "I like it enormously. It's so curious, so new, to be in the very midst of a type of human beings absolutely unknown to you or you to them. Beatrice, you look a little tragic. Must you? Can't you look at it as I do?"

"I can't. I just feel all the time that it's shockingly improper, both for you and for me, and Miss Dering and Mrs. Bent."

"That's your grandmother again."

"Very likely, dear; but I do think that in this case my grandmother was perfectly right."

Here Rica caught Caroline's eyes fixed on her with a mocking smile. She held her breath and wondered horrifiedly if by any chance she could have overheard her.

"She couldn't have," she reflected comfortably; for she went and sat down by Beatrice's side, directly after, and soon the two were talking quietly together.

Rica went off content, to watch Margaret, and soon set to

imitating her as far as talking to the girls went. But she found, to her disgust, that she made very little way with them, and it began to dawn on her astonished comprehension that they considerably resented her presence among them. She had returned rather discomfited to a corner to watch Frank, and be sorry for his tired face, when Caroline came up to her.

"You made just now an excessively banal observation," said Miss Brett insolently, "to the effect that you were observing a new species. You have a notion, I imagine, that you know the world. You may, in your little, limited way. But I should advise you to confine your generalisations to your own circle; they're quite inadequate to this. You have *not* come among a new species, but among girls like yourself, my dear; moreover, with certain personal adornments left out, possibly, each and all made in the image of God. Ask Miss Daintree. It's her frank acceptation of this unfortunate fact that makes her the one ideal of goodness to every one in this room—to all this new type on whom you hoped to whet your appetite for change. Don't try to imitate Miss Daintree; you're too cock-sure, you'll make a bad hand of it. She's never cock-sure. It's her nice, natural young habits that we like—her foolish insecurity in her methods, her lovable way of thinking aloud her crude, struggling thoughts; above all, her anxiety to do right. It's not saintly nor heroic, bless you, but it's flesh and blood. Can't you imitate the other woman—sit apart, pure and shocked? You'll impose on no one, of course, but you'll be amusing. When you grow wiser, you'll know it's better to know nothing, unless you're big enough to know everything. If you must instruct humanity—go and begin on your brother, and tell him to keep his own side of the fence, begin on his own kind, not to worry all round and make bad blood generally."

Rica simply gasped as she had this torrent poured out on her in Caroline's low, swift, mocking tones, with rich, full, soft melody in every note of them. She felt snubbed to speechlessness for the first time in her life, and Frank

found her, quite five minutes afterwards, still standing motionless, with parted lips and with an almost insignificant air about her.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Frank, pinch me, that I may know I'm Rica Weston, with the six of you under my thumb. I have never before been made to feel like a crushed worm."

"I thought you'd get it, my dear. That air of taking observations of yours was just the thing to put their backs up, and Caroline is a fine spokeswoman."

"Good Heavens!" said Rica, "she is. She had a hit at you too."

"There was probably a lot of truth in it then. However, we'd better disperse ourselves, or they'll think we're taking notes on morals. Couldn't you look at home a bit? You have a scared, unaccustomed appearance. Look at Miss Dering, there's not a symptom of strenuousness or unusualness about her."

"Oh, I couldn't be like her for the life of me. The magnificent person told me so. You must be born to this sort of thing, I perceive, not made."

"That's exactly where it is. It'll be a long evening for you, old girl."

Frank thrust his hands deep into his pockets and went off, feeling as if another illusion were undergoing burial. Life seemed to have no diversions of any sort for him, just now, but burial services of one sort or another.

To Margaret's great relief, Caroline's vagrant fancy seemed still to be arrested by Mrs. Hyde. She hovered about her in a half-sullen, half-interested way, and held brief snatches of talk with her, to Beatrice's inward bewilderment. The girl astonished, repelled, and attracted her all at once. For the marvellous beauty of her face she could find no admiration, nothing but a strange, swelling pity. She had no fear of Caroline, as Margaret had, and the girl hadn't an atom of the power over her that she had over Margaret. On the contrary, Caroline felt dominated and cowed in the presence of this still, cold woman. Pos-

sibly the truth was that in Beatrice, who was an incomplete being, there were no depths for Caroline to claim kin with, and the heights of Caroline, if she had any, were on such an entirely different plane from those of Beatrice, that the latter could in no sort of way even conceive of them.

Caroline's bodily presence certainly was a relief in this amazing society; her cool, well-bred looks and movements, her leisurely, soft voice, her dainty clothing; above all, her smooth, unpainted skin, and her cloud of soft, dark, unfringed hair, were all pleasant exceptions. One could at least breathe naturally when in her neighbourhood, Beatrice thought, looking with a prim, severe mouth at Margaret in the midst of a chattering crowd of impossible horrors. Beatrice turned wearily, to find Mrs. Bent regarding her with solemnity. If she had turned her head the other way, she would have found Caroline laughing down on her oddly.

"Can you understand it any better, dear Madam?" Mrs. Bent inquired anxiously.

"I can never come one inch nearer understanding it," said Mrs. Hyde, with a decisive thinning of her lips.

"The doves among the pots." Mrs. Bent murmured a snatch of her old text deprecatingly.

"But," said Beatrice, with a slow, backward arch of her neck, "I never could quite understand that text. Why should the doves lie among pots when there were such numbers of other nice, clean places for them to choose? There always seems to me to have been a want of dignity and of proper self-respect in those doves. The text appears to me a dangerous one, capable of unsuitable adaptation."

Mrs. Bent thought, with a quick start, that although the words of it came free enough to her lips, the text had always borne very much the same significance to her mind. She was silent, and looked at Margaret with a question of supper in her eyes. Margaret understood and hastened matters, she arranged Beatrice between Frank and Caroline, and carried Rica off to her end of the table, glad to get away from the group. Frank on her mind was bad enough, but with Beatrice and the volcanic Caroline there too, she felt alto-

gether too heavy laden. Miss Weston was a comfortable person; she would make the most of her while she carved cold pork and tried to relieve her other guests from the depressing influence of high society.

"Is there nothing I can do?" said Rica meekly. She felt so very second-fiddley.

"Would you mind helping the beetroot and passing the bread?"

She soon began to feel better. It was a new sensation in the intervals of her labours to watch Margaret's small, delicate, ever-varying face, cutting pork for her guests' excellent appetites. Her fine, slender hands seemed essentially capable ones. Rica looked curiously to see if the knife were hardening the skin anywhere on them. Margaret laughed.

"Oh, there were bad blisters at first; they're accustomed to it now, and all right."

"You're most overwhelmingly sharp," said Rica—"does nothing escape you?"

"Not much," she said, with a quiet laugh; "else where should I be?"

"Oh," said Rica, with a small gasp, "it's altogether beyond me."

"So it should be," said Margaret, in a low, quick voice. "Keep where you are—you don't know when you're well off if you don't. This is a bad atmosphere for you—it's choking. You never get a long, free, satisfactory breath. You see even Mr. Weston is weakening in his notions. He knows now that knowledge with a rush is a drowning thing, and leaves you—clammy. Poll, do get some more beer."

Rica made a mental comparison between Margaret's words and the nice, girlish looks of her, and wondered which told most of the truth. Then she looked up the table to catch a glimpse of Beatrice. She was saying some subdued, gentle thing to Caroline, and trying to eat.

"Never again," Rica told herself. "Once will be enough to make a memory for Geoffrey out of. It's fortunate I'm *not a creature* of sentiment, or I'd be having fits all the

time, between all of them. As it is, I feel upside down. Will they ever, ever, ever have swallowed pork enough? And oh, my poor Beatrice, the noise of their teeth on the crackling! and you with neither sympathy nor imagination to idealise anything!"

When Caroline, after supper, signified her willingness to sing, Margaret had a bad five minutes. A revulsion of impishness was coming on the girl, and she had more than half a mind to take it out in some of her own methods. Something in her face, as she turned over a parcel of music, filled Rica with an unpleasant excitement. She caught Margaret as she was passing.

"Does she ever frighten you?" she whispered.

"She does."

"Have you this minute an atom of power over her?"

"Not an atom."

"What may she do?" Rica asked breathlessly.

"She may sing something so awful that even Mrs. Hyde will understand."

"Or?"

"She may sing a hymn like an angel."

They waited, Rica involuntarily clutching the other's arm. Frank, who had been talking to Mrs. Hyde, caught sight suddenly of Caroline's face. He went over to the piano.

"Let's bury the hatchet for once," he said, in a pleasant, unobservant sort of way, "and will you sing a song of my choosing. You've got it there."

She flung a sudden look at him.

"Yes," she said; "for the sake of variety, we'll square it for an evening, and play at chums. It would be something really nice and new, by the way, to have a duet with a parson." She laughed. "Are you game?" She held out a song.

"Certainly, if you'll put up with my voice."

"Oh," she explained superbly, "when I sing, no one listens to the other voice. Indeed, if a man was capable of forgetting himself, he'd not sing at all, but just listen to me. Please keep time; you don't as a rule."

Beatrice watched them with cold disapproval till the song began, and then amazement overtook her, and before it was over she had gained a vague, distant idea of the bond that drew Margaret to these women, that made her able to step down from her hereditary pedestal and look into their hearts.

"Perhaps, after all," Beatrice thought reluctantly, "perhaps that God does wish us to believe that even these are made in His image. I can't," she thought again, pressing her hands together, and looking into her lap. "It makes the whole world as distorted for me as their faces. I will not believe it—or think of it," she said, still looking down on her trembling fingers.

"Margaret," Rica whispered, "he is a good old thing, isn't he?"

"He's a good deal more than that," said Margaret, looking penitently in his direction.

"Never mind, all this has done a lot for him. He was too cock-sure—like the rest of us; it's a family failing."

When the song was finished, Caroline turned to Frank with a sudden, soft laugh.

"Look at the faces of the young persons; after all, it was as good a joke as shocking her."

"Can't you be honest?" said Frank. "You couldn't hurt a sick woman for the life of you."

She turned an odd, quick look on him.

"Upon my word, I could even do that," she said slowly. "Joking apart, there's really something rather demoralising in this life of mine."

A weak, womanish lump rose in Frank's throat as he went over to Mrs. Hyde. He had received the one outspoken confession of failure of a lifetime.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE door of Frank Weston's room was open, and at a mirror in a little over-mantel Colclough was looking at himself with a good deal of serene satisfaction. He rolled a cigarette with grave precision, then raised his eyes again to the glass, and passed his hand reflectively over his head. His unfettered reflections came to heel with a jerk, for behind his own image he suddenly caught sight, in the corner of the glass, of Rica's mocking face. He wheeled round on her.

"I'm so sorry to have disturbed you," she said kindly, sitting down and taking off her jacket.

"How long were you there?"

"Five minutes about. I made noise enough, too, coming up the stairs. One of your steps wants oiling or something. You have a delightful faculty of absorption. Couldn't you make it over to Frank in his sermon times? He might be more coherent then. His thoughts have such an awkward habit of getting broken up and detached."

"Ah, now you have a theme to work on. May I smoke?"

"Certainly, if you feel you must. I'm coming to lunch."

"Won't you take off your—the thing you have on your head? It seems to have been born a bonnet, and bred up something else."

"It's a toque," she said, taking out her pin.

"I looked rather an ass, perhaps?" he inquired from a cloud of smoke.

"No; you looked every inch a man."

"Thinking of a girl?"

"No—of himself."

"In connection with a girl?"

"Don't men ever think seriously except in connection with a girl?"

"Not often,—unless, it may be, of the Jews or his soul. I have done with the Jews this long time, and I have an accommodating soul—it never preys on my mind. Shall I tell you what I was thinking about?"

His look gave her a small start, but she told him to go on.

"You know," he said, "how ill I was. I thought myself a doomed man, as every one else did, and I find I'm not—quite the contrary. I've cheated the doctors all round."

She wished she could laugh, or say a sharp thing, but she felt dumb and stupid.

"You don't know what an awful bore it is for a man of my age to have to put every bit of himself under restraint; to have to 'walk delicately,' like Agag, all day long; to have to keep your life from meddling with other lives, as if you were a leper, or something equally miserable. It's a limiting process, and a grind, and brings on general morbidness and demoralisation."

"You were never morbid," she said limply.

"Wasn't I—behind doors and in dark places? It's a pleasant sensation, I can tell you, to be able to drop the minor key for good, and get back on the major. Life is too good a thing to slip out of with any degree of enjoyment. That is, of course, when you generally get what you want—as I do. I wanted India, coin, and big game, and I got it. Then I wanted more coin, and home, and I got these. You grow greedy as you go on. I want a big thing now—a very big thing. I want you. And some day," he said, with an amazingly sweet smile, "I shall get you."

She jumped up and faced him.

"It takes two for this sort of an arrangement," she said breathlessly. "I have never even considered you from that point of view. I only thought of you——"

"In connection with draughts? Couldn't you forget the *draughts?*"

"I couldn't. It would be like—like——"

"Marrying a resurrection?"

"I never said such a thing."

"No, but you thought it."

He suddenly swooped down on her hands and caught them in a firm clasp. She was so startled and arrested by the youth in his face, that she made no attempt to release herself. She just looked at him and waited.

"Miss Weston," he said, you've been restless for ever so long now. Wild thoughts of making the most of your youth and your opportunities in these stirring times, of going off the line in some way or another, have been running riot in you frightfully. Look, Rica, there's not the ghost of a fraction of a vocation in you. Give it up, dear, and drop to commonplace matrimony."

"How do you know anything of me or my wants?"

"I love you, dear, so of course I know most things about you."

She looked at him with a retort on her lips, but it suddenly seemed to her that she had known this all along. She pulled her hands away and dropped limply into her chair.

"It never occurred to me till this minute."

"How does it strike you, now that it has?"

"I think," she said, "I think somehow I have been had."

"It would have been more consistent if I had carried out my original intention of dying? I think on the whole I should prefer marrying you."

"But it takes two for that," she said sharply.

"I have thought for the two of us, and it's all right," he said, laughing softly.

"Is thy servant a dog?"

"No, but she's a girl."

He came and looked down at her with such a great tenderness that she knew, although she would have bitten out her tongue rather than confess it to man or mortal, that she was ready, then and there, to go with him, if necessary with only a pack on her back, through all time on into eternity.

All at once her eyes filled with tears. She laughed, and then the tears brimmed over.

"When I have succeeded in considering you apart from draughts," she said a little unsteadily, "perhaps I may be glad that you're not going to die—and are going to marry me. But I wonder—I wonder very much if I'm quite cut out for this sort of thing."

"It's precisely what you are cut out for. You're altogether too much behind the times for anything else. What is a girl nowadays without a fad, or a grievance, or some unlawful occupation? On the face of it, the love of a mere man is her only refuge."

"I think," she said, with a little quick drawing in of her breath, "it's beginning to feel nice already—but it's wretchedly commonplace. I might have done ever so much more with my life. I might have experienced a thousand sensations—might, indeed, have been a sensation myself, and have made people gape for a whole week. I might have done a million mischiefs. I have wasted all my opportunities, and done nothing at all but get engaged. How does it happen that, living in the thick of tragedies and complications, I should escape scot-free—not an echo of melodrama about me?"

"It's early days to despair. It's after marriage that melodrama comes."

It struck her that he had the sweetest, honestest eyes she had ever looked into.

"Jim Colclough," she said, "that sort of melodrama doesn't suit me. It's been vulgarised. The day I march up the church with you or any one else, and promise things, I'll keep them. Jim, I think draughts somehow have made me know you as well as—other things have made you know me. Different things often affect people to the same end."

"Rica, do you think you could manage to kiss me?"

"I'll try.——Jim, don't get too fiercely strong. I have been accustomed, since I was the height of the table, to take care of people."

"When you've got the whole of a man into your hands to take care of, you'll find them quite full enough. You see, you uncomfortable person, a fellow will have to trust you with all or nothing. It's a good deal for one woman."

"I fancy it's a sort of burthen my back will bear," said Rica serenely. "It might have caved in under a vocation, or any other necessity of the age. Perhaps the commonplace retrograde feminine back is only fitted to the burthen of a husband. If so, it may be as well not to kick against the pricks, unless one's back is specially prepared for higher uses."

"Just so, dear."

"I have been providentially trained in a good school, Jim, as far as your soul's welfare is concerned. A long experience of six brothers makes it an abject waste of any man's time to lie to a sister. All the same," she said as she flung on him a little flash of delight, "it is nice to think that you couldn't tell a lie to save your life. I hope, however, if you ever did cut down a cherry-tree and behave like a horrid little ass, that your father soundly thrashed you."

"He never failed to, dear. If a man lies badly to wives or fathers, it's generally their own fault."

"Or their make," added Rica.

"Exactly," said he.

"Jim, I am just grasping the consciousness that I have really done a very good thing for myself. You're an excellent match. Aunt Gordon often said so, even when we thought such things out of your line. She used to bestow many unshed tears on you, and consider favourably the position and income of your widow. By the way, I should never have got to know you properly except for that cough. Don't you remember all the dances I made you sit out. I believe you were laughing at me half the time."

"No, I was crying for you metaphorically more than half the time."

She put her cheek down on his hand.

"You were lonely and wanted me—why didn't you tell

me? I believe engagement would have fitted on me as easily then as it seems to do now. It's my normal occupation, I fancy. I have this minute not one desire beyond it. Why didn't you ask me before, Jim?"

"It's playing it pretty low down on a woman, to ask her to be his widow; and I knew you too well, dear—you'd never have resisted the temptation. Consider—I should have required every second of your time and strength and thoughts. I should have been equal in my own single person to twelve brothers and a parish; and when you lost your occupation, you'd have been absolutely nowhere for an entire year. Your step-mother, with her strong sense of religion, would have insisted on the proper lapse of time. Then I could not stand the vision of you in weeds. I often tried to reconcile myself to it, as you waltzed with the other fellows, while I waited in some corner, with a screen at my back. Rica, have you the smallest idea of how ridiculously and insanely I love you, or what a grind it has been not to have entreated you long ago to become my widow?"

She cuddled back in her chair.

"I could never grasp the insane part of love," she said. "I don't like insanity; it's like yearnings and vocations, and beyond me. I want nothing to disturb this nice, wholesome, serene state of being. Can't we just go on and marry," she said, with a strange depth in her voice, "in a nice matter-of-fact way, with no turnings inside-out, or upheavals, or squalls, or insanities? I like everyday, lawful things. Never, never, never shall I forget the other night, Margaret, and Beatrice, and Frank, and that awful Spook; it was all pain, and sorrow, and suffering, and concealment, nothing simple and straight and to be spoken aloud and laughed over in honest, sane Saxon words. Oh, Jim, I do want a straightforward, natural, above-board life. You must give it to me."

"My darling," he said tenderly, "sorrows *may* come."

"God has to do with these," she said. "I'm not a coward particularly, but it's men and women who bring the complications and the miseries one can only whisper of in

the darkness—the pain that it's half sin to suffer, the danger in the face of which one mustn't look, but must fly from like a coward, as from a plague. I want wholesomeness, and truth, and sanity."

She put out her hand and laid it in his, turning her eager eyes on him.

"I'd face any honest danger or any honest sorrow with you, good old Jim. I'd even have faced being your widow; but, after all, it wouldn't have been quite straight of you."

"No, it would have been a bad beginning—taken the starch out of things generally. Better to wait and get what you want honestly," he added, with a happy laugh.

"I don't quite see," began Rica, after a minute, with some irrelevance, "why Geoffrey's face never moves me as Beatrice's and Margaret's do. It ought to ever so much more, instead of which, just lately, it's quite invigorated me."

"You don't surely expect the fellow to go about the country moaning over his sins! He works hard and keeps straight—what else do you want of him? If you felt enervated in his presence, now, you might have cause to complain. Upon my word, I believe you're afraid he hasn't his own bad times. Don't distress yourself; he has them all right. Men of his sort don't lightly forget the pain and devotion of two good women in any subsequent success or happiness."

"It's an unfair division of pain, two women's to one man's."

"It's the way of the world; no man ever sinned but at least two women suffered. We're weaker numerically. I suppose it comes in the law of compensation."

"Jim, you may be an amateur philosopher, but you're also a cold-blooded reptile."

"Amateur philosophers mostly are."

"Jim," she said suddenly, "did you ever make a woman suffer? I mean the sort of suffering one must keep for the night."

He looked out of the window for a minute, considering, then back at her.

"I never did, dear. I'm too selfish by a good deal; the thought of her would have bothered me so at odd times."

"I knew that, of course, or I wouldn't have asked you," she said, a little surprised and indignant at the slight tone of excusing in his voice.

CHAPTER XLII.

MARGARET and Mrs. Bent were still sitting up, although it was past eleven o'clock. One of Margaret's restless, restive moods was on her. She was tired of her book, she had a cold, and couldn't sing, and Poll's snores from the room behind the kitchen irritated her unreasonably, they sounded so sordid. She had flown once or twice out into the four feet square of a yard to escape them, but the hum of life, and the far-off, chastened sound of a rather pleasant piano-organ, called to her longing eyes visions of dancing and bare-necks, and all manner of delicious young delights.

On her return from her latest excursion, she had poked up the fire, and put a bright little brass kettle on it.

"Mrs. Bent," she said, "I'm going to make tea and buttered toast; it will seem festive, and we can consider that we are making merry. You put wicked thoughts into my head, one day, when you wished for a low bodice for me, and to-night these thoughts have grown rather insane. It's partly the scent of violets, I think. Your fault too, you worldly old woman. I want to dance, and rest in conservatories, and gaze on duchesses and bric-a-brac. Can you manage to eat buttered toast at this time of night without slaying yourself? It wouldn't be the least festive for me to eat while you contemplated me through your glasses. Could you possibly manage an anchovy on your toast? It would confer an air of distinction upon it, and be a little more carnal-minded than toast pure and simple."

"Dear heart," cried Mrs. Bent, nearly jumping off her chair, "it would be the death of me! I'll eat the toast, dear, with just a scrap of butter on it, but them anchovies, my

dear, I'd never recover one of 'em; even with your fine young stomach I doubt if it's wise."

"I'm not inclined for wisdom to-night—I yearn, and long, and pine, for folly; and anchovies are the only things in the house with a trace of worldly, foolish flavour about them."

"Miss Margaret, dear," said Mrs. Bent conscientiously, "you've forgotten Poll."

Margaret turned a laughing, amused face on her.

"Oh don't! Can't you understand I'm taking refuge in anchovies simply as a corrective to Poll? I want to wipe her and the like of her out of my very existence just for a time. I'd give a lot to know if any real, professional good person ever felt the least bit as I do, who honestly and without making any bones about it wanted to 'know folly.' Oh, Mrs. Bent, don't look tired and puzzled, you dear—you can't answer me, no one could; and you needn't say little silent, contradictory prayers either. I see them struggling together in your eyes. Just let me talk and confess to the air, while I make the toast and grill the anchovies. Their nice little cultured hissing is softening down Poll's untrammelled snores; and just smell them! That can't hurt your digestion anyway. Now I'll make you hot whisky-and-water. I wish I didn't detest it so. It's more worldly than tea, and the lemon has a nice, well-bred air—it suits low-necks, and oysters, and curled hair. Now sit here, with the flowers in the middle of the tray, and me opposite you, all violety, and Poll's snores to keep us from spiritual pride."

When Margaret had eaten her anchovies with a healthy disregard for consequences, and Mrs. Bent had swallowed her toast with secret misgivings, surreptitiously scraping off the butter, they took up their candles to go to bed. Margaret stood for a minute silently looking into the dying embers, with a dissatisfied, restless look in her eyes, and Mrs. Bent watched her helplessly.

"Listen," said Margaret, setting down her candle suddenly, and hurrying to the door; "there's a cab, and it has stopped. Some one's coming."

"Take care, dear," cried Mrs. Bent, following her hastily. "Ask who it is first."

"It's me—Caroline Davis. Let me in quickly."

Margaret opened the door, and Caroline, studiously veiled, swept in magnificently. Mrs. Bent as usual mourned shamefacedly over the narrowness of her passage. This feeling of shortcoming, which was invariably co-incident with Caroline's arrival on the scene, annoyed her a good deal. She felt it neither with Margaret nor, oddly enough, with Mrs. Hyde. It seemed to her a reprehensible exaltation of virtue over vice, unbefitting a professed Christian, who into the bargain had been confidential maid in first families.

"I want you to come at once to my house," Caroline said. "There has been a fire, and a girl got burnt in it, and I think she's dying. I can't manage her. I thought you might do something. She heard you singing one night as she stood outside your door."

"Miss Margaret, dear," said Mrs. Bent, with stern decision, "I will come too."

"You! No indeed you won't—out into the damp night with your rheumatism! You must go to bed at once."

"Don't put yourself out, Mrs. Bent," Caroline said languidly, turning deliberately on her. "You hardly know, I fancy, the sort of girl she is, or the extent of her influence, or you would know that she is as safe with me as she would be with yourself. Don't let the suspicions bred of your age and your small way of life make you quite senseless. Are you ready, Miss Daintree?"

"Good-bye, dear," Margaret whispered, giving Mrs. Bent a consolatory kiss. "I shall be all right. Never mind her. Shall I call Poll to help you? No? Well, if I'm home tonight I have the key."

She went out and got into the cab, wondering why, whenever she felt more than usually quite unfit for anything, she surely had to do it.

"I wonder if I shall ever be able to idle the least bit!"

she thought, with a stifled sigh, and a quaint touch of amusement at Caroline's modestly veiled face, and her own unblushing bare one.

"Now tell me," she said, trying not to feel horrid and sleepy. "I don't understand anything yet. What girl is it? Do I know her?"

"No; she's a wretched little thing I knew once in her better times. She was a lady some centuries ago, and a beauty, and a spoilt child. I met her a fortnight ago, late at night, torn to pieces with a cough, and spitting tons of blood. She couldn't make a living any longer, and she hadn't the pluck of a sick cat, she couldn't help herself in life, and she couldn't help herself out of it."

Margaret glanced sharply at Caroline. There was a little jarring note in her smooth voice.

"I took her in and gave her an empty room. I had to—there was no choice. More fool I, all the same. Heavens! the time I've had with her! If she wasn't spitting blood she was weeping over her sins or her lovers. Night and day, she never stopped. I suggested you, which landed her sharp in hysterics. She thinks you a sort of an angel, a fine, God-like creature, with your hands full of heavenly fire for sinners' heads. But since she's had a turn in the earthly flames, she's lost her terror of the other sort; she's been whimpering for you these two hours."

"But the fire—how did it happen?"

"Oh, that was the beastly part. She really was getting on well, nearly fit to get up, the doctor said; he also said I had missed my line, nursing was my vocation." She laughed, but something in her laugh frightened Margaret. She looked curiously into her face, and in a flash of light she saw that she had two veils on.

"Well, just as she was about to do me credit, my idiot of a maid set fire somehow to some rags. The sparks flew everywhere, and it's a wonder we weren't all burnt out. It was by the merest chance we saved her."

Margaret looked at her again. She spoke now in her *usual lazy*, pathetic voice, but there had crept into its tones

a muffled-knell suggestion that filled Margaret with uneasiness. She started suddenly.

"You are burnt and in pain! Caroline, why do you wear those veils?"

"Modesty, my dear."

Margaret caught her arm and tried to look through the veils. Caroline evaded her with a quick backward movement.

"Don't excite yourself," she said. "I'm just a little scorched, and I have some regard for my complexion. I always protect it from the night air."

She thrust out her umbrella and gave the cabman a few directions with it. They soon reached a narrow turning out of Baker Street; down this they struck, turning again into a bright, pleasant street of small villa houses. At one of these Caroline stopped the cab, and they went in. There was a tempered blaze of light in the passage from an amber lamp, a general effect of light and soft colours, with a hideous smell of burning all through the house, and a feeling of grit under the feet.

Margaret knew at once that there had been a bad fire, and she was seized with a fear of the face behind those veils. Caroline opened the door of a large room to the right, and brought her in.

"She's horribly excitable," she said. "I must tell her you are here. I shall be back soon."

She was not back soon. Margaret had ample time to take stock of her surroundings. The first thing that struck her in the room was the audacious richness and diversity of the colours in it, and the superb art in their blending. She felt an odd glow of delight amidst the splendour. She felt that here life was lived intensely, imperially, but without any suggestion of enervation, of shrinking degradation. She looked round the cream-panelled walls, with their rich brocade hangings, and with about half a dozen little gems of sketches, all placed in good lights. All the draperies in the room fell in simple antique folds, and through all the stuffs and curtains there was a floating, ethereal scent of

ancient spices, kept sacred in old temples for the uses of gods. The mixture of simplicity and nobility in all the room was strangely pleasant, and there was no over-crowding—on the contrary, indeed, a fine sense of large bareness—about it; there was space and light and air in abundance,—wonderful, too, considering that the trail of the villa was over all the exterior.

"If she's a Spook," Margaret thought, "she's the Spook of an empress—there's nothing little or mean about her."

She sat down and looked all round again, with a sigh of infinite enjoyment.

"Oh," she said, half aloud, "if she only would! What a credit she would be to God and to women! I never knew till this minute how awfully much I like her. I wonder if there's one man living big enough or wise enough to take her in his arms and teach her to cry and to rest, then to give her back her birthright! Oh!"

A hideous chattering from some hidden place made her drop the book she had taken up and spring to her feet. It was a monkey behind an easel, gloating and jabbering over a basket of nuts. He leered horribly at Margaret when he caught sight of her round the corner.

"He must surely be human," she thought, shivering, "or a devil! No mere animal could have so evil a look."

She looked down at him and shivered again. As she stood shivering, the terror at the foundations of Caroline, and her impossibility, slowly revealed themselves to her. The birthright that she had lost was a divine thing, which, if a woman loses, no man can ever return into her hands. For neither to God nor to man is it given to put back the hand on the clock of Time.

Margaret drew a slow, painful breath of horror, and looked round her fearfully. She saw a big hound asleep before the fire; she ran and flopped down on her knees before him, and shook him until he awoke. She must forget that jabbering, awful thing and what she had learned as she stood beside him. She must touch some simple, sinless creature to ease the great pain in her heart. The dog

blinked sleepily at her, and finding her young and foolish, after one cynical glance he dropped his head into her lap and went to sleep again.

But she felt a little less desolate, rubbing his soft nose.

Presently the monkey stopped chattering, and then in the silence faint, muffled groans were wafted in from some near-lying room, and the sound of a querulous voice rose and fell on the still air.

Caroline came in the minute after. When the monkey saw her, he again fell to chattering, and was just going to spring to her, when she waved him back with a fierce shake of her hand. She still wore her hat and veil, and sat down as if she could no longer stand. She chirrupped to the monkey, who jumped on to her shoulder, muttering discontentedly and trying to see her face through the veils. Suddenly he made an angry grab at the gauze; a smart touch of the little dusky hand brought him to his senses. He cowered down on her neck in abject submission, and whimpered.

"Bah!" she said, shaking him off. "You're too like the creatures you caricature! Go back to your perch. Shall we go to her?" she said tiredly. "The doctor has been since I went out. She's dying and delirious; she'll never regain consciousness, so he says. She's beyond pious exhortations. The line of her delirium will show you how much she needed them, and, with equal accuracy, how much she would have benefited by them."

"But you—you must be attended to at once."

Margaret caught her by main force and held her down.

"You shall do anything you like with me," Caroline said wearily, "when you've seen her and suggested anything conducive to her comfort that may occur to you. One feels a natural tendency to apply some salve to a departing soul, no matter what character its body may have borne. Clerical instinct tripping me up again! It's often embarrassing. Come now."

She was a tiny creature, so tiny that her body hardly curved the bedclothes. Her face looked weirdly out of a

foam of delicate white lace and fine linen. It was a pitiful, small face, with unstable, wild blue eyes, and unbraced lips, that used to be weak and red and sweet, but now nothing was left of their pretty past but their weakness.

When she saw Margaret she turned her head towards her, and began to babble deprecatingly, with a fearful, furtive, evasive look in her eyes, full of little foolish, tawdry lies. In an impulse of sheer fright, lest death might surprise her with such an expression, Margaret caught her in her strong arms and pressed her silly face against her breast and tried to still the poor babblings. The clasp of the strong, compelling arms terrified the creature. She made an excited effort to look into her captor's face, then she set to pouring out a muffled torrent of bits of old prayers, shreds of foolish rhymes, small trivial oaths, fit only for mere toy women, and little simpering calls on her God—a God fitted to the requirements of toys. Then a sudden fear filled her —she broke into thin screams, and turned off suddenly into a tinkling cackle of laughter. She was small all through—small, and shallow, and mean. Caroline took up one of her tiny hands curiously.

"Look at the size of it," she said, "and the miserable indecision. If you could have heard her before she got delirious. Her tries at praying were funny, but they gave one rather a sick feeling that it's a poor thing to be a woman. Fancy blowing that poor little piece of thistledown into a world like this!"

The girl made a convulsive dart at Caroline's hand, and whimpered, in her babyish lisp,—

"God bless papa, and mamma, and little brothers and sisters—and, oh, God, give me a good time once more—just one little once, dear God!"

She broke off with a horrid laugh that, on the face of it, must have been copied studiously from some honoured model. The girl lying there never produced it unaided. Margaret moistened the poor lips tenderly.

"Well, what do you recommend?" said Caroline. "Have you no professional impulse? Have you no experi-

ment to try on this essay in womanhood? She's already been the victim of several. One more wouldn't hurt, and might be amusing."

The little girl wrenched herself from Margaret's arms, writhing with pain.

"It's too cruel," Caroline exclaimed, "not to give her the ghost of a chance, and now to twist her into knots of pain! Why do you look like that? The thing is unreasonable and atrociously unfair. Don't you see?"

"I don't see," said Margaret. "I feel a perfect fool in the matter. I don't understand it one atom. The one thing I do know is that it isn't unfair. It's only ignorance that's ever unfair. This isn't her only chance. She's been a naughty little child this first trial; she'll grow up, perhaps, in the next, and justify her womanhood. She's had her whippings, the poor little thing! God doesn't blow thistle-fluff about, or let men do it, for mere child's play. Caroline, you're too clever, you know too much of good and evil —to jibe and jeer at God. That sort of thing comes from ignorance, not knowledge. As long as the stars are swung in the heavens, and the tides ebb and flow, and the flowers blow and the birds sing, and goodness lurks in every human heart—as you and I, who have come down to the very bed-rock of women's hearts, have to know and to acknowledge daily, else we should die—so long as all these miracles come to pass, it is only a fool who will mock at God. Don't think me emotional or hysterical. I am not," she said, soothing the girl, whom she had again lifted a little; "but I'm groping myself for light in a great darkness, and I can only cling on obstinately to my own poor little beliefs."

"That's something, in this *galère*," muttered Caroline.

She sat down the minute after, shivering, and her teeth began to chatter. Margaret put the girl down softly, and came to her.

"I believe I am emotional and hysterical too, or I'd take better care of you. Come; we can do nothing for her. Come!"

"I'm so cold. Will you ask Sarah to light a fire in my room—a big one—a bonfire?"

"Do you know if your mistress is much hurt?" Margaret asked eagerly, as soon as she got hold of the girl and set her to work.

"I know she be." She slowly surveyed Margaret, and added an emphatic "Mum, 'er face is all rawr. I saw 'it.'"

"Why didn't you tell the doctor?"

"Lor' love you, mum, I'd like to catch myself. She's that 'orty, and 'e was too full o' t'other to look at 'er. She went into that room, and the flames a-blazin' sky-'igh. It's a wonder she didn't come out a chip. She haint no fear o' nothink, she haint. She went into that there room laffin', if you'll believe me. Lawks, it's the queer one she is!" she remarked, with the irrepressible impulse of her tribe to tell secrets.

"Do you know where the doctor lives?"

"Yes, mum."

"Will you go for him?"

She hesitated. "She'll be blazin' wild."

"I'll take all the blame."

"Well, mum, I'll go, and I 'opes no 'arm will come of it. She's not loud in her tantrums, not 'er, but that 'orty, you'd wish you 'adn't never been born."

Margaret put Caroline's bed ready; then she went back and found her still sitting by the girl's bed, shivering.

"I've sent for the doctor, and I want you to come to your room."

"I don't want any doctor; he can do nothing. However, I'll come. Here goes!"

She got up, staggered, and fell back into the chair with a little groan. Margaret helped her to her feet and into her room. She crouched greedily near the fire.

"Give me a screen, please. I must get warm, but I can't stand this blaze."

"Let me take off your hat and veils."

"Time enough when the doctor comes."

Sarah couldn't find the first doctor, but brought another, who looked grim and severe. Sarah had been making hay on the road, and the quality of it had seemingly added dignity to his demeanour. He was a young, man, who was as yet more correct than Christian. He was gentle enough with Caroline, however, and it was by no fault of his that, as he was in the midst of unfastening her veils, she fell back unconscious. He and Margaret lifted her on to the sofa, and as he went on with his unfastening, he told Margaret to get some brandy.

"It's just as well she should not recover till I can examine her injuries," he said, "but there ought to be some stimulant at hand."

When Margaret got back, all the coverings were off, and the gas full on. She put down the brandy and steadied herself to look at the horrid thing on the sofa. It was hardly like a human face. The hair was singed into a brownish stiff scrub, the skin was torn and discoloured, the mouth was parted in a grin, the full, creamy lids were swollen and distorted; the only thing left perfect in her perfect face were the little gleaming white teeth, and they gave the last touch of awfulness to the poor mouth.

Margaret's heart stood still, but no lamentations could touch this case.

"When did it occur?"

"Four hours ago."

"She's been out in the frosty air since?"

"Yes."

"H'm!"

Suddenly Sarah caught a full view of the face, and fled, howling. The doctor took a distrustful glance at Margaret, as if he expected another howl.

"Will she die?" Margaret got the words out painfully, her lips felt so dry and stiff.

"No, oh, no! She'll be disfigured for life, of course."

"As if that weren't worse than death!" she said sharply.

The doctor put ointment on his lint, and gave her an unsatisfied inspection. She was a deal too handsome for

this house and this time of night, and her dress fitted her like a glove.

"Will you lift her head—there—a pin—now the brandy."

Caroline came to quickly, and sat up.

"I must insist on your going to bed directly," the doctor said.

"I'll go presently. The disfigurement is permanent, I suppose?"

"I fear so. It happened in the performance of a noble duty," he added, with pompous benevolence. "That may help to console you."

"Oh yes, that's ample consolation. Under the circumstances you may prefer your fee at once."

He was sensibly embarrassed, but he took it with an inward thanksgiving, and went to see the other girl. He told Margaret he would send a nurse to sit with her and "do what was necessary."

"I suppose you wouldn't care for a clergyman?"

"A clergyman!" Margaret looked down on the bed. "Of what earthly use would a clergyman be?"

"I don't know—the circumstances suggested one."

"Oh, you're very kind," she said wearily; "but I don't think a clergyman would in any sort of way affect these circumstances."

CHAPTER XLIII.

"Is he gone?" said Caroline.

"Yes; and you're to go to bed at once."

"That young man would run a Methodist Chapel admirably."

"Very likely; but I want you to come at once to bed."

"I have a little business of my own to do first. Do give me that mirror."

Margaret gave it to her unwillingly. She propped it up with some books in a good light, and sat down before it. Then, one by one, she took the dressings off her face, laid them on the table, supported her head with her hands, and proceeded to examine herself with a horrid, unflinching scrutiny.

"Eyes, mouth, nose, skin, everything gone!" she said. "I might have been through the fires of hell itself. Miss Daintree, do you think God played me this trick with a view to conversion?"

Her raw lips quivered with the pain of the laugh that broke through them.

"Just look at my mouth, how a smile graces it!"

She laughed again, and Margaret's flesh crept on her bones.

"You saved the girl at your own risk and in your right mind. It is a coward's part to blame God."

Suddenly her voice broke.

"Caroline, my poor Caroline, I am as grieved for your spoilt beauty as if it were my own. And if I, a woman, with her littleness and jealousy, can feel heart-broken for that

face of yours, how do you think Christ, in His big Divine pity, feels for you as you sit there in your desolation? But He doesn't undo things. He made you big to begin with, He can't make you shrink into insignificance at the crucial moment of your life. You went into the flames at the bidding of the best part of you. If you hadn't done it, you must have been a slur on yourself, on me, on every living man and woman for ever. That would have been worse even than an exquisite face spoilt."

She stopped suddenly, and watched, in a silent intensity of pain, the bloodshot eyes staring at themselves in stony silence. With a half-smothered sob, she bent down and threw one arm round the trembling shoulders of the girl.

"Is there nothing I can say or do to make things less bitter, poor Caroline? Is it nothing to you to have acted as nobly as the best woman in London could have done? You risked your beauty, counting the cost——"

"Oh, don't! I couldn't have stood the sound of that creature crackling in the flames. I look at things now from another point of view. There, watch that grin! I wonder if I could do anything in the variety line—*La femme qui rit*, for instance. You see, it's now a question of ways and means. You appear to forget that one's living must be considered. Oh dear, no! Nothing will change things—not even the consciousness of having acted in the best manner of a British matron of repute."

"Oh, Caroline, will you let me help you to bed?"

The steady composure of Caroline's voice, the curious, fixed resolve in her motionless eyes, filled Margaret with a nameless dread. She put her arms about her neck. She wanted to hold her, to keep her safe in her warm arms from the cold mist of horror that was falling round her.

"Have you any idea at all of my strength?" Caroline said, wrenching herself from her clasp, her face quivering under its scars.

"Let me take off your bodice," Margaret said gently.

When her sudden spasm of pain had passed, Caroline seemed to have grown indifferent. Her neck and shoulders

had escaped with hardly a speck on them, and Margaret passed her hand softly over the satin skin.

"Look at your shoulders, and that arm," she said. "I never saw anything half so beautiful. Your beauty isn't gone." She stooped and kissed the gleaming shoulders.

Caroline stood up quickly, with a choky noise in her throat. "I'll go to bed," she said abruptly. "Do help me with these rags. Sarah has the ointment."

When Margaret returned with the ointment, Caroline was still staring at herself, silent and indifferent. She got her quickly to bed, gave her a warm drink, which she took unresistingly, and lay down, while Margaret built up the fire and made little noiseless preparations for the night.

"You think, then," said Caroline suddenly, out of her weird mufflings, "that the God of the Christian takes notice of my mutilated face, the chief aim of which hitherto has been the undoing of men?" Caroline gave a low, gurgling laugh, and putting out her uninjured hand touched Margaret's ruffled hair with curious tenderness.

"Stick to your beliefs, my dear; they're slightly unreasonable, but very nearly as pretty as you are yourself. The notion of God as He is writ and spoke troubling Himself over the burnt skin of the like of me, is funny. At the same time, if He's as human as all that, He'll understand other things. I should object to be looked upon as a coward by any one with so broad a mind as your supposition implies. Ah, I feel like a battered old hulk in search of a harbour!"

There was a dead silence. Margaret knew that she had nothing to say that could move or soften this wretched heart. The power to believe comes neither by wishes nor in sudden gushes. God knows what He is about while we babble. But into Margaret's heart, in the pause, there struck like death the awful isolation in which each human creature lives, one heart yearning to another, and between the two a great gulf fixed.

Suddenly out of the silence Caroline cried aloud,—

"I give it up—I never was good at riddles. If I had

been made ugly, and with parish proclivities, I should have walked as virtuously as my sisters. I lived the life I was made for. And after all," she added, in her old languid drawl, "the riddle isn't worth the working out. Don't upset your poor little flower of a face. We mustn't argue, you and I."

"No, we'll not. You must sleep now, and when you awake things will be different, and better perhaps."

"Yes, I shall sleep, and when I awake things will be different—and better perhaps. Who knows?"

She turned from the flickering light, and settled herself to sleep; but sleep wouldn't come to her. She tossed and stirred tiredly; she threw the clothes off her impatiently, and pulled them up again, shivering; then she rested for a few minutes, and Margaret saw that she dozed a little. But after a while she awoke and sat up.

"The stuff that creature put on my face has nearly taken the pain away," she said. "I feel a lot better. I'm frightfully strong, and rather rampant. I feel as if I should like a new sensation."

"Try silence," said Margaret, laughing.

"I've tried it in my day, and have found it more potent and stimulating than speech. *Then* I had my face to back it. Silence now would be ineffectual. Shall I take off the rags, and let you see?"

"Caroline, couldn't you sleep?"

"Not yet. I'm bursting for a novelty, don't I tell you? Annoying, isn't it, when one has exhausted every known sensation? I think—I think I shall ascend the pulpit, and teach. Every other known species of woman does it now, why not I, and my like? We are as old as death, and as potent. We laugh and triumph while the rest of you whine and entreat, or, may Heaven give you sense—turn schoolmarm! Before I claim my woman's right and get on my hind legs, I want to give you a bit of advice. Go back to your own as soon as you can. You have come face to face with evil. You have knowledge, but with it you have sweetness; you are still tender, you are still humble, you're

cock-sure of nothing, you're just a dear, good girl, knowing good and evil, and what constitutes the difference between them. You have no mawkish folly of sentiment, or pretence of ignorance, to handicap you. As a matter of fact you know what you have to defend yourself and your men against, and your children and your children's children. We have smitten kings, and brought strife to nations, and we will again. And yet," she said softly, with a strange, thrilling sadness in her voice, "you have the remedy in your own hands—in those soft little pink palms of yours; but it's such an old-fashioned, exploded, Biblical remedy. I wouldn't dare to mention it except with a shrouded face—shrouded in oiled rags, certainly, but that's a detail."

"What do you mean?" cried Margaret, almost frightened at the girl's voice, it was so infinitely tender.

"I mean that you and the like of you have driven the art of true love out into the desert, and you are driving your men day by day into the highways and hedges to us—do you hear, you who know what we are, and what mercy you may expect from us? And now that it has suddenly occurred to those among you who think, that it is time to compel men to come back, they stand on barrels, and swear at them and talk high falutin, do the school-marm all round, in fact, to the life. Do you know what the men that are being whipped back to righteousness with these ridiculous little whips do? They come to us, and to women who rank with us, only they don't happen to be found out, and laugh at them—come with one devil, my dear, return with seven. I can't for the life of me understand how you girls are so ignorant of your power. We know ours, thanks be to our God! We foster and make the best of it; no tribunal, however heavenly, can deny that. I'll tell you a secret, Margaret. If you—the tribe of you—braced yourselves up, and went the right road, even in this corrupt age, this decade of moral earthquakes, you'd drive us out of the field."

"Oh, Caroline—you know——"

"I know you're in a wretched transitional state, all of

you. You're learning the truth of things, and your new knowledge has brushed your bloom off and you don't know from Adam what to do with the things you are learning. You're getting preached at, besides, poor things, which is perfectly disastrous to the morals. But you'll emerge in time. And now, hear the last word and testament of one who knows. Give up revoltings and smartness—in that you're mostly only a bad imitation of us! Don't bother about superlatives of any sort, even of cleverness. Eschew the school-marm, forget your selfishnesses——"

"Caroline!"

"Hush! Where was I? Oh—your strivings after riches, and go out into the desert, pick up your poor old broken idol, True-Love, dust, and cleanse and repair it, and set it up again in your hearts, and then the old sweetness, and nobleness, and graciousness, that men desire in such as you, will grow up again about you, and they'll learn to reverence themselves for your sakes."

"But——" broke in Margaret.

"Do not interrupt the preacher! Men like goodness—I assure you they do. Look how they cling on to shreds of it in us. It's altogether your own faults that they pass over great wastes of it in you. You make it impossible for them, one way or another. You put it badly, and take the warmth away, converting yourselves into wet blankets. You take the tenderness out, and make yourselves as uncomfortable as a horsehair sofa—you forget the fun, and are as dull as a Mothers' Meeting. Learn your power and use it. Work as hard to show man the beauty of goodness as you've done for generations to get his name and establishment. Make the goodness of girls the pivot of men's dreams. Then, silly fools, you'd rule the world *before* your hand is on the cradle, as you ought to do. The day of the born fool is past, but the thing is, a girl must learn not to be a born fool before marriage, not after, when she's had all her babies, and made all her mistakes. Shutting the stable door when the horses are gone seems to be the attitude of *half the* women going. They should start better equipped,

not pick up their armoury as they go along. I feel rather like a traitor giving away my party, but being a moralist amuses me for the minute. I feel really in rather an illuminated mood. I could get emotional in a jiffy, and wring your heart. If I were a man, now, regardless of complexion, I might even turn popular preacher—it's a pity my sex should debar me from that safety-valve. Do please call Sarah—I'm gasping for some whisky and Apollinaris."

She drank it and had lain down again to try to sleep, when she looked at Margaret's tired face watching her wistfully, and a sudden compunction seized her.

"I am demoralised," she thought, grinning under her lint. "I would have let her sit there and watch it all without a qualm. I wonder," she said aloud, "if there is any known hell from which I could, after a lengthened residence, emerge, with any resemblance to your Mrs. Hyde? It would be an interesting experiment on souls, don't you think? I could even forget the pain in observing the transformation. Now look here. I want you to do something. I want you, directly you find I am asleep, to go home. I simply loathe being watched. And please don't come till ten o'clock to-morrow. I shall sleep late and heavy—I feel so funny to-night. I can't help looking on myself as some one else. It's this morality fit that's upset me. I was wondering that minute how I should have struck men as a good woman. I wish rather I had tried. Goodness is a little mawkish, but at the same time I think it's a little lovely and august. Not a word, my dear, you've chosen the better part; for I fancy that even in heaven that poor dear Magdalen must have found many embarrassments! Be sure to send Sarah for a cab; don't walk on any account. Good-night," she said sleepily.

She turned away, and, after a few tossings, fell into a quiet sleep. When she was quite sure of her, Margaret went softly into the other room to look at the dead girl; then as soon as she had arranged that Sarah should sleep on a stretcher outside Caroline's door and keep up the fire, she put on her hat and cloak. Sarah had been previously

listening at the door, wondering if her mistress were going mad, and had the cab waiting in the street for her.

As soon as she had been set down at her own door, Margaret felt an overpowering desire to go back. She wavered and hesitated—Caroline had asked her so particularly to leave her. There was no danger, the doctor had said. She put the key into the door and half turned it, but she turned it back again, and put it into her pocket, looking round eagerly for the cab. There was no sign of it.

"I can't help it—I simply must go," she said half-aloud.

As she went on, her longing grew more feverish; she looked everywhere for a cab, but it was the worst hour in the twenty-four to find one—too early and too late. She counted the number of streets that lay between her and Caroline, and in her impatience they seemed to have lengthened themselves into miles. At last she could stand it no longer; she took to her heels and ran like the wind up street and down, in and out the fog-folds of the dreary grey dawn. The few early workmen, slouching unwillingly towards the city, stared at her a little, but they were accustomed to erratic goings-on among maidens, and only burred a sleepy "Go it, my girl!" or threw a bet at her as she passed.

At last she reached the door, and knocked gently. There wasn't a stir. She knocked again a little louder, then again and again. There wasn't a murmur of sound; it might have been a house of the dead. After giving as loud a knock as she dared to, she looked round in search of any possible open window, and at last, when she had given up all hope of getting in, she found that the window at the other side of the bow was unfastened, and that if she could jump from the step railings to the sill, she could get in.

It was a wide stretch, with next to nothing to grasp on to when she landed, and with the alternative of a fourteen-feet drop into the flagged area. In the early morning, dangers get exaggerated to tired nerves. Margaret's heart fell, and she was turning away, when she thought she heard a moan from out the still house, and the desire to get in grew unreasonable in her. She took her hat and cloak off,

freed herself well from her skirts, got up on the railings, and took her leap. She caught on to the edge of the window, and stood for a minute trembling on the narrow, slippery ledge. Then she crept carefully round, pulled up the window, and got in.

Sarah was heavily asleep on her stretcher. Caroline, too, was asleep, and seemed all right. But there was a curious scent in the room—Margaret opened the windows wider, but still the heavy scent remained. Once or twice she thought she could detect some strange, unaccustomed smell, half smothered under the scent. A vague feeling of uneasiness made her stoop over Caroline, and touch her gently. She moved her head slightly, and murmuring drowsily, "Good-night," she settled herself again to sleep, and gradually the heavy smell got lost in the scent, and Caroline's sleep grew sounder.

"I wonder what her awakening will bring!" Margaret thought, leaning her head against the bed.

Then the usual old devils of doubt, and littleness, and ignorance rose up and beset her, and made goodness small and evil great, and love of no account. Why had God not fashioned this girl to His glory, not to His disgrace? Why should the power to compel men's worship be given into the hands of such as she, and denied to good girls—to the girls who become the mothers of men's children? "She says it's our fault, the fault of the girls and the women of the world. I wonder what is truth—I wonder if I shall *ever* find it?"

She stood up and went into the other room. The inexorableness of death suited her mood. She looked down with an odd, cold longing on the little dead face, that looked pure and sweet and peaceful, in spite of the evil it had wrought. A little ray of warmth stirred Margaret's heart.

"There *is* hope," she said aloud; "and God is good. It would have been an atrocious thing to have let her live to old age."

Caroline still slept deeply and noiselessly. Margaret,

she hardly knew why, felt a little uneasy. She touched her again, and pushed back some singed hair that had got loose and fallen on the dressings. As she stooped she got another whiff of the heavy smell.

"What is it, I wonder? Shall I call any one? But she must be terribly spent, and naturally would sleep heavily. I'll wait."

Gradually the breathing grew deeper and slower. Margaret shook her gently. She only moaned slightly.

"Perhaps the shock and the pain make her sleep like this," she wondered doubtfully.

She took the bottle the doctor had left and smelt it. "Perhaps it's opium and he means her to sleep heavily."

The breathing still deepened — deepened — and one or two little sighs alternated with the breaths. All at once they grew snorting and strange, and a shuddering convulsion shook Caroline's whole frame. Margaret ran, shook up Sarah, and sent her off post-haste for the doctor. The snorting rose and fell; the little soft sighs grew to great gasps. Margaret freed the girl's face from the dressings; the unhurt bits of skin were purple and livid. The mouth had fallen open. Margaret clutched at the bed and swayed, nearly falling, but she remembered that for this sort of thing there was no time. She forced herself back to reasonableness. Then God bent her stiff knees for her. The men who pray, we are told, can do it standing. A woman can't; it's a consolation and a dear delight to her to kneel. He gave her power to speak aloud little foolish words, and, better still, He let her know that He could hear them.

"You are a just God," she said, over and over again, "and you made her for better uses. And if a woman can love her as I do—and forgive her—forgive her everything—it must be so much easier for You, Who are both God and man."

She sprang up at the doctor's knock, and wondered a little wildly if she should have been working instead of praying; but she concluded that, being so ignorant, she *might* only have done harm.

"Turn up the light full," the doctor said. He opened the swollen lids, and laid two fingers gently on the moveless eyeballs. "Opium," he said. He did all that he could do, and Margaret helped him. "I must leave you alone," he said at last, looking into her face with a great pity. "This is hopeless, while there is another life, just in the balance, wanting my help——"

"Go—don't mind me. I know now what to do."

Alone she continued the desperate fight; but she could no longer pray. God understood, she thought, and He was a just God. Slower and slower came the breathing; the face grew more livid; the white teeth clenched themselves.

"O God, you do pity her, you are sorry!" Margaret cried at last. She could no longer bear her mortal pain dumb and alone. She stooped and kissed Caroline's ivory neck, and the feel of it drew icy sweat from every pore of her.

The girl writhed and quivered in her last struggle, and when the doctor came in again, breathless, she had awaked, and it was different—"better, perhaps." Who knows?

CHAPTER XLIV.

JUST three days later, Rica, Colclough, and Frank were together in Frank's room. The first two were bubbling over with an honest, wholesome delight in each other and themselves.

Rica was determined to make the very most of her engagement.

"I wouldn't of course," she said, "if I thought that even forty years together would breed in either of us contempt. I couldn't make memories for myself, just to turn them afterward into uncomfortable contrasts, as no end of people seem to do."

As for Colclough, the consciousness of being himself again, and having full possession of Rica, sharpened his wits, and made him feel as a dozen giants refreshed.

At first the two had tried, out of loving-kindness for Frank's less fortunate condition, to bury their sensations in their respective breasts when he was about, but he promptly discovered these benevolent intentions, and routed the laughter and content out of their respective sepulchres.

On his own part, he held his tongue as to his tribulations, and did his work. But he had been badly hit, and even the hardiest and most breezy of love-making spoilt many a dinner for him.

"I shall go and see Margaret directly I feel a little less lazy," said Rica from the corner of the sofa. "Looking after Jim wears me out."

"Yes; that, and three balls, two teas, and four dinners in a week."

"That's nothing to one man."

"I hope you'll find her in," said Frank. "Her eyes somewhow are all wrong, and there's a subdued, hard sort of excitement about her. I think she'd be the better if she could manage to turn it into hysterics, or some other trick of woman's."

"Do you indeed? Somehow, weeping and gnashing of teeth hasn't that salutary effect on the female constitution it used to have when she was a Lucy. A simple tear seemed then to have been sufficient to turn the tide of 'dear Lucy's' sensations, and heal her heart. It's a stiff-necked and perverse generation now, which needs stronger medicine."

"It's Nature the girl wants," observed Colclough from the modest retirement of a smoke-cloud. "She's bottled up the sensations incidental to her age and state of being, and has tried to sit on them. The thing wouldn't stand the pressure, that's all. General blow up."

"It's not her sensations that have blown her up, it's her work. Such a forlorn-hope sort of business would have blown me up long ago."

"It's unnatural," growled Colclough.

"On the contrary, I think it's natural," said Rica perversely. "It's time, after eighteen-hundred years, that girls should help each other. They can't unless they have an understanding of those who need their help most."

"Humph!"

He had a vast admiration for Margaret and her efforts, but it would be another thing altogether for Rica—she who had been hitherto so eminently sane.

"Don't disturb yourself," she said, laughing. "Haven't I told you I could never rise to such heights? But I have always admired any one who doesn't turn back anyway till she's got to the end of her furrow. Now I'll go. Jim, you can come to the corner of the street with me. You look to me as if you wanted some Club."

"A fellow never gets any credit for benevolence. It was the thought of that girl losing the best years of her life pulling the devil by the tail that struck me for the moment."

"Translated into English, that means, I suppose, you're

sorry she's losing a good time attacking windmills. I never look at her without nearly lifting up my voice and howling at the thought of her never once having been at a ball. Just to think of her not ever having had a coming-out night!—a blissful memory of that lovely new frock in which she first realises properly what, in spite of all their whining and swears, it is to be a woman, a dear, sweet, foolish, vain woman, who tries to be good, but who knows she's pretty, and that she can make gods, or fools, or devils, of men, just as she chooses. And even if she wouldn't make a fool or a devil of a man for the life of her, it's a delightful thing to know she could. It elevates the mind. Oh, other girls may be horrid, very likely are, but oneself, at certain times in one's life, is a delicious, divine bit of a dream, and I don't wonder she should strike men in the same light. Frank, you have an improve-the-occasion look in your eye altogether unbefitting a sinful man. Jim, what am I going to make of you?"

"A gibbering idiot, my dear, if you don't get some understanding of silence."

Frank yawned.

"I'm slightly confused by your volley of words, but I'm afraid if you go on advancing yourselves at the rate you're doing, you'll soon be more like conic sections, my good girl, than bits of dreams."

"Ah, no advancement will ever quench the little sparks of foolishness in us, any more than the contrary will the little sparks of goodness. Caroline, for instance, marching into a room full of flames, with a face like hers, which, after all, was her sole possession, her one ewe-lamb."

She sprang up and put her hat on carefully before the glass.

"Frank, remember you're to dine at Beatrice's to-morrow. Jim, come here and look at yourself; there's a smut on your right cheek that I should have felt and removed if I had been in my grave. Curious how innocent of intuition men are!"

"I wonder that girl hasn't gone stark, staring mad," said

Rica, as they threaded their way through a mesh of dreary streets. "How does she keep her individuality, eating, drinking, sleeping in this monotony?"

"Without even the blessed memory of a ball-dress to console her!" put in Colclough.

"I should turn in a month into the image of that geranium there in that window. Look, another and another, all in broken bottles—the bottles even seem to be all broken at exactly the same place. Look down those mean rows of mean houses, all hideously alike, everything washed in with one cold, slimy grey, and not a person you see, standing upright—shadowy, crouching creatures, slouching along to their graves, and with a worm at the root of each of them, just as there is one at the root of every geranium in every bottle. Jim—you smoking furnace!—can't you feel them wriggling? Look at the dull grey leaves of that plant. Don't you long to pick it up, and kill the thing inside it? Jim, do you think it's ever going to be different?"

He smoked on for a minute.

"After all, my dear, everything has its compensations. If we were on the other side of Oxford Street, I couldn't smoke."

"Oh, you demon!"

"It will be different, but not to-day or to-morrow, or the next day—not till the worms have gnawed at the root of generations of your shadowy creatures, every one of whom, all the same, has something in him pulling him up. Cheer up, Rica, the worms haven't all the innings. It might hurt your reputation to have a cigarette in these parts, otherwise one might pull you straight a bit; you're morbid. Go where you will, there are hands stretching out to help these people, and learning wisdom by mistakes. To-morrow we'll do better than we have done to-day. Then your creatures will lift their bowed shoulders, and years hence, when we 'are not,' men will walk erect, and women will learn to laugh, even in the tear-smothered heart of this great city. Meanwhile, all we've got to do is to be jolly and to consider

the two points of view, that of the whole work, the completed plan,

"'The other of the minute's work,
Man's first
Step to the plan's completeness.'"

"The men that bother themselves with these matters can do that all right, I suppose, and so they keep sane and jolly, and can take their little daily steps, eating and drinking, and generally making merry, because all the time they can grasp the fine completed plan, and it keeps their balance right. Women have generations of limited horizons and bad educations behind them; they can't take the daily steps of the minute's work with any degree of comfort or content. They've got the far-offness of the completed plan on their mind, and it crushes them, or makes miseries of them. They take themselves so seriously that they are like lead on your hands, else they fuss and cackle."

"No doubt it's true, dear. A person of your age and experience can't make mistakes. It seems, all the same, unreasonable of women. Time is an uncourteous beast, and won't hurry up. even for a lady."

"He hurries up enough when he wants to put wrinkles into her," Rica said grimly. "By the way, I hope Margaret Dering isn't going to get the 'plan' and its drawbacks on her nerves. Frank's account looks like it."

"Oh, she's all right, her fulness of youth will straighten her directly. By the way, I suppose you know nothing at all of the human geraniums you take so much interest in?"

"Quite enough to haunt me."

"I'll tell you something. Tangible facts haunt less than theories. That man slouching towards us reminds me of one disagreeable fact, which is the extraordinary way these people age. Age drops on them in a night, and cuts off youth as completely as if it had never existed. The lining of the face takes some time, of course, but that's a detail. And the queer thing is, they never look back."

"I don't see how they could to one blank monotony."

"But it isn't blank monotony, to the street Arab. You'll find him one day full of a half-fiendish sort of crackling humour; his wink a work of art. The next day the pall of manhood will have fallen on him; he couldn't wink for the life of him, and as to make sport of his betters, he has enough to do to damn them, unless, of course, he happens to be a busman. They still retain some street Arab."

"You're as depressing, Jim, as a real consciously good woman, and I'm ashamed of you. Here's the corner. Go and smoke, perhaps drink, and babble a little of the foolishness of women, but, for goodness' sake, whatever you do, come back to dinner a Christian man."

Mrs. Bent came to the door, and at sight of Rica she beamed all over. Rica took her breath away now and then, but she had a deep respect and admiration for her, and there was a fine, worldly air about her that did credit to her establishment. Her coming to it, too, seemed natural and "wholesome like," no restless caprice of a sick woman, her veneration for whom was of a very different order, partaking more of the "desire of the moth for the star," and leaving her often with a pain in a rigid back, and a sinful repulsion to Poll. It was the same old thing again; Beatrice's foundations had never got a firm grasp on the earth.

"Miss Weston, you're kindly welcome! Come in, my dear young lady. Miss Margaret's gone to post a letter; she'll be back soon."

Rica wished she would come. The room was gay and bright and clean, but there seemed to her an air of trying to be cheerful about it, that aggravated her. She had never before seen it without Margaret, and her absence made an amazing difference. Mrs. Bent sat down, and poured out, in a gentle, monotonous stream, the deaths of the two women, and the rank impropriety of her young lady's being alone in the house; "and a doctor, too," she added, "who, she supposed, would at least know a lady when he saw her, and know too where her place was, and go about wondering and making remarks, and having no religion mostly, poor critters, with their sciences and things, wouldn't take it as a

minister of God might." Mrs. Bent felt each minute better, a ready listener being an infinite consolation.

Rica, on the contrary, felt distinctly worse. She wanted to yawn and stretch in this tiny place, and the brilliancy of the walls in their poor little efforts to give the lie to the slimy greyness of this world she had entered made her vindictive. To give her her due, however, unamiable as she felt, she managed to look pleasant enough, and Mrs. Bent was still babbling contentedly when Margaret came in.

Directly she saw her, Rica forgot the fans and the slime, and was only conscious of the fact that Margaret wanted something. "But what does she want?" Rica thought; "that's the question." She was herself again in a twinkling; the hankering to "regulate," incidental to the weak flesh, when it's the keeper of six brothers, got hold of her and gave her fresh zest for life.

"She wants—I believe she wants a shaking!"

She pounced on her and gave her the foretaste of one. Then she pushed her down into a chair.

"Margaret Dering, you're radically wrong—you're going straight as a die to the devil. You have the haunted, exasperating, depraved look of a woman with a mission. Look here, you'll have to return without delay to a state of laughter and original sin. I have never, never before seen your hair badly done. You have only one soul to lose or save, and time is short, and carelessness as gross as this is unpardonable."

Mrs. Bent wiped her spectacles; then she got up and retreated amazedly to the kitchen.

"See! Your bodice is all buttoned crooked."

"Very likely," Margaret said, half laughing, but with a distinct inclination to cry.

"You poor thing! I could this minute fall to kissing you with the greatest ease, and then we would cry and sniff, and give ourselves headaches and red noses, and generally soften our brains. It's more to the point a great deal for me to do your hair, while you fasten your bodice straight. Come on, child of the desert, and 'clean up.'"

When they got up the steep steps, Margaret wondered what was to happen next, if she must reel out the whole hideous story of "that night." Rica soon cut her fears short.

"Now," she said, "I'm not going to hear a word of it all to-day; you can tell me some other time. There's something I want to tell you instead. I had a letter from my uncle on Monday, and it was half full of your aunts; they look lonely and grey, he says, and are shrivelling up into nothing. Don't you think you ought to go and see them, even for a few days?"

Margaret started. She had decided long ago that it was best to cut that part of her life off altogether until the time should come when she must renew it. Her aunts, as far as she knew, didn't want her, and her personal memory of them had hardly a bright spot in it. Oddly enough, Rica had never before spoken to her of them; she did so now very sensibly and practically. She spoke of the cold repressed grief of their quaint, useless journeyings to London, and how weary and aged they looked.

"I suppose," said Margaret, at last, "I have as a matter of fact been horribly selfish."

"I think it's more than probable," said Rica, giving the final twist to a long strand of hair. "But what earthly use would you be if you didn't fall into sin now and then? And we all like to shunt commonplace duties—those sorts of things require dramatic effects to make them palatable. I wonder if you would come down to-morrow? I want rather to see my uncle. He's a dear old thing. He never did a scrap of harm in his life, or much tangible good, but he's a nice, dear, restful man. Can you come to-morrow?"

"I ought to," she said.

"You ought."

Rica stooped and kissed her, and wished she herself didn't feel so horribly disappointed at the thought of losing a first night, a dinner, and a dance; for now that Jim had taken his health into his own hands, she found he could dance like an angel, and was untireable.

"Now take a good look at yourself," she said, smothering a sigh. "Don't you feel considerably more of a child of God and an inheritor of the Kingdom? That shaded hair, guinea gold at the tips, and nut-brown in the depths, is a dream of delight. Now you're clothed and in your right mind, come on. We'll descend, then, on our relations by the twelve o'clock train to-morrow, leaving—I forget where, but we'll find out."

When they reached the parlour Rica gave a well-pleased sniff.

"Buttered toast. And no one's is like Mrs. Bent's: but I know of old, one has to wait for it. Her fine freedom from hurry is Mrs. Bent's best point. Meanwhile, I wish you would enlighten my mind on one point. As you don't want to write a book or get canonised, or capture a curate, what single personal effect do you find in this life you're leading?"

Margaret was silent for a minute; then she gave a sudden brilliant laugh.

"I think," she said, "the first effect has been a humiliating one. I have had the tables turned upon me. I went out with a vague idea of doing good, and I have been done good to; I went out to sow, and have come back with an armful of gleanings; I went out expecting to find a people altogether unlike ourselves, and I have found a class similar in all but their sin—if you prick them they bleed, if you tickle them they laugh; in short, they are human and require no new machinery or special institutions for their treatment. Of this I am convinced, that nothing so keeps these girls out of the fold of respectability as the belief that they are out of it."

"But," Rica said, a little irritated, "when all this knowledge is gained, when we have everything at our finger-tips, books and women and men, and our own insides, what's it to do for us?"

"I think it'll make our hearts big. I have a sort of notion that until we feel at least a hankering to be able to love, any way to tolerate, the poorest, meanest woman, in

God's wide world, there will still be something wanting in our love for God and man."

"I haven't a symptom of this hankering anywhere about me; and yet,osomehow, I think Jim gets the best I'm capable of."

"You're nice and natural. I daresay you have unconsciously all I can't express. Who wants ugly visible striving if one has those things by a sort of birthright?"

"I know nothing at all of those high-toned things, but a girl has somehow to give the best of herself to a man who couldn't tell a lie if he tried."

"Yes," said Margaret, with a curious little smile, "or even if he could——and here's Mrs. Bent and the toast. I should have been helping you make it instead of chattering."

"Miss Margaret, dear, if you had done so, I should have been that mortified! You had your manners to attend to, my dear."

She put the tray down and folded her hands primly, while Margaret made the tea.

CHAPTER XLV.

THEY went down to Derbyshire by the mid-day train. For an hour or more after they had steamed out of the station, Rica was so full of longings for Jim and other distractions, that she only produced a dozen or so of stodgy commonplaces; then it suddenly occurred to her that she was a "selfish brute." In a spasm of generosity she had left a whirl of delight to keep ghosts at bay for a neighbour, and here she was, creating toy ones for herself, besides getting each moment farther from her whirl. There was no sense in it. She pulled herself up, insisted on getting out and having tea at the next stopping-place, though it was not yet four o'clock. They could get out again and have coffee at five. Ten minutes on a hot day's journey should never be wasted as long as there were tea and coffee within reach of dusty throats.

When at last they rushed into the little wayside station at Hales, Rica congratulated herself that Margaret was in a wholesome, sturdy frame of mind, ready for dragons, or aunts, or any other emergencies.

They left their Gladstone bags in the charge of two porters, and decided to walk. It was a lovely evening, and said Margaret,—

"There is no hurry."

Rica laughed.

"Look here," she said, "my uncle dines at seven. I'll skulk round your side premises behind the laurels at nine. Could you run out and tell me the result?"

"It'll keep her from mooning down by that stream, anyway, for long. You can't 'weep gall,' and 'bay the moon,'

and that sort of thing, if you have to time yourself," she thought philosophically.

"I can come out of course," said Margaret, not very joyfully.

The moral effect of being timed didn't appeal as pleasantly to her as to her timer.

"Do you see that stile?" said Rica. "That's where Mr. Bridges and I stood to recover ourselves after our first visit to your aunts, the day you were out. Did the poor little thing ever produce any of his sensations and sentiments with regard to you in words?"

"No, but in things a thousand times worse—in looks, and blushes, and stutterings; and his knees used to shake, and little splutters of pain used to break out about his lips, and in the wrinkles in his forehead. It often looked so degradingly like stomach-ache! It was an awful effect to have on any man. I used to hate myself when I wasn't ashamed or amused, because I somehow knew that he was a good little fellow, and I felt such a brute only to be able to grin, or to long to hide him under a napkin out of my sight."

"It's nice to think that being ridiculous is for ever at an end for him. It used to hurt him so horribly. It must have been a delightful shock to find himself a person of dignity, with a fine, commanding presence."

"How do you know he has one?"

"I can guess. Heaven wouldn't be heaven to that little creature if he had to shrink and blush whenever a girl looked at him. Now, here we part, and I wish instead of that last groundy coffee you had had a whisky-and-soda, like that fat British matron with the six thin daughters."

"I don't think even that would round Aunt Katherine's angles for me."

"Remember nine o'clock, and eat your dinner.—Oh, dear, I forgot it's tea. Think of facing dragons, and ordering your sentiments towards your neighbour's husband, on tea and bread-and-butter! What do men know of the tribulations that beset us? Imagine a man's being called on to resist the devil on tea! If he were, and succeeded, he would

announce it from the housetop in hexameters. Yet we do it daily, mentally or physically, and get not so much as a 'thank you.' I'm getting morbid, more shame to me," she thought, looking up among the trees, "with the air full of the ringing of joybells from the hearts of myriads of glad creatures, and that blessed, serene content in the eyes of those home-coming cows—and—and yes, there he is, the dear, lazy old uncle, jogging along with James and the pony, all half-asleep, and all with a nice, quiet conviction of the goodness of God, and the certainty of an excellent dinner."

Margaret's sensations, in the meantime, were hardly so agreeable. Directly she came in sight of the house, she began to feel, reasonably enough too, how much more heroic it would have been, on the whole, if she had boldly faced her situation, instead of having flown helter-skelter before it. Then the melancholy fact struck her that if she had wanted windmills to fight she surely had them handy in the womankind of her own household.

She had opened the gate, but she did not go in; she leant against it, hot, and tired, and dusty, and watched the house through the solemn branches of the yews. Then she looked out across the fields. It was all fresh, and sweet, and lovely; it would have been a delicious evening to be happy in. She sighed. The return of a prodigal with complications, each of which would be subjected to exhaustive researches, and followed by tears, and sniffs, and maledictory prayers, was a horrid prospect, and one-sided. She had, indeed, lived more or less among swine, and eaten husks; but it had been to save herself from sin. Yet there would be neither rejoicing, still less fatted calf. She felt, in her miserable discomfort, that she would have been really more satisfactory to her aunts as a fully certificated prodigal. She was an anomalous creature now, with no marketable value, not even that as a shocking example.

This would never do. She could no more face her relations in this frame of mind than she could fly. She shut the gate, and turned irresolutely back the road she had come.

Then her ears caught the murmuring purl of water, and the tap-tap of a stone-chat; there was only one pair in the whole neighbourhood, and they built in the tree just at the foot of the hill, in the bend of the stream.

She faced about, sped up the hill, paused on the crown to listen to the whispering of the beech leaves, and to see if the tiny one in the shade of the biggest still kept its tender, green, baby leaves through the heat as it used to do, and how the sheen of the copper beech appeared to her.

When we come back, as a rule, things have grown smaller, and their colours have lost tone; but Margaret didn't find it so. The valley seemed to stretch farther than it had ever done, and the colours in all things had softened and deepened. The stone-chat tapped musically, the river went rushing on its way. Margaret drew in one big breath of beauty, and ran on again down the hill, across the dyke, through the clump of nut-bushes, down to the long grasses by the stream's bank. She threw herself full length among them, her head leaning over the water. The swirl, and plash, and patter, confused her. She sat up, took off her hat, made a sponge of a wisp of grass, and bathed the dust off her face. The stone-chat had gone to bed; there wasn't a sound but the monotonous song of the brook, and the occasional splash of a trout in the brown pool just below. Margaret put her elbows on her knees, and her chin into her hands.

"I'm clean and fresh now," she told herself, "and perhaps I may be able to think straight, not let my thoughts reel as if I were a drunken man."

But Caroline's and the other girl's dead faces, and Geoffrey's living one, began to bob up and down before her eyes in the stillness, while her two aunts hovered in the background. Thinking straight under the conditions seemed difficult. She put her head impatiently down among the grasses, and disturbed a lark from his first sleep. He sprang up almost from under her skirts, and in a minute he burst out into a song, wondering a little at this sudden call on him. Margaret turned on her back and watched him.

He was hovering nearly motionless above her, getting rid, in the prelude to his song, of the few notes of pain his heart held; then making his sudden spring towards heaven, he began his little song of superb triumph. In the midst of a trill, sudden sleep falling on him, he swooped towards his bed.

In the silence that followed, Margaret's ghosts were laid, and a new consciousness gradually awoke within her. She could not have expressed it in words; she just knew that she had not lost her youth with her ignorance, as had always been the dread, before which she had cowered in her foolish, bitter times; the youth in her had only become intensified—had been touched by eternity, and would remain in her heart for ever as a witness. She knew that everything had grown better and bigger, and that God Himself had taught that lark. She knew that nothing is purposeless, no skies are all grey, and that complete failure is but the vision of dim-eyed ignorance. The significance of pain towards perfection took vague shape in her, and she was aware that even a lost love has its uses—its tender, sad uses. But above all created things she saw love reigning supreme, from its foundations deep in the earth to its heights higher than heaven, because they touch God. It was the divine sense of growth that had slid into her soul. It was conversion, only in "*etwas andern wörter.*"

When she stood up she found that she was trembling. She shook herself; oddly enough, the treatment steadied her. Then she suddenly remembered that it must be quite half-past six, and that she would be late for tea. It was a pity that there was no one to see her but the nut-bushes and the water, for there was that in her face which makes men think most reverently and tenderly of girlhood, and in her laugh, as she thought of the consequences of her lateness, there was a curious sweetness.

She ran, hatless, up hill and down, till she got to the gate; then she straightened herself and put on her hat. She paused for a minute to consider if she could, with any semblance of honesty, assume the appearance of a miserable

sinner. She couldn't; she had floundered along a stony path, but she felt in that moment that she had gone out empty and come back full. It was impossible to tell flagrant lies.

Hannah backed at sight of her, and dropped, gasping, into a chair. She had grown grimmer and older, and sourer. Margaret stooped and kissed her shyly. It was a little like kissing a rolling-pin.

"She had one human weakness; it was buttered toast," Margaret thought. "I fear, from the look of her, she must have lost it."

"Are my aunts in the library?"

"Yes, Miss Margaret."

She stood up, but made no move to announce the visitor; she looked her up and down, and groaned respectfully. The dress was grey and quite simple, but it was the build. And as there was the hat still to condemn, and Hannah was a slow-thinking person, Margaret saw it was useless to wait, so she passed her and opened the door herself.

Miss Julia was sewing a sponge-bag for a Chinese missionary basket. Miss Dering was reading aloud. They both stood up, staring. Miss Julia trembled; her sister did nothing of the sort. She took three steps in Margaret's direction.

"Take off your hat," she said.

Margaret, who was prepared for anything, did it meekly enough. Miss Julia drew nearer, and, from behind her sister, surveyed the girl, each moment showing signals of distress—an outpouring was at hand. Meanwhile, Miss Katherine raked Margaret from stem to stern, punctuating her disapproval with grunts.

"Katherine," cried Miss Julia, in an agony, "I think it has pleased the Lord to bring her back to the paths of righteousness. Our precious Lord," she pleaded, throwing a fearful glance, half horror, half longing, at her, "thought well to pardon the unhappy Magdalen. Let us——"

Miss Dering turned and looked at her slowly.

"Are you mad, Sister Julia, or a fool? Is it by you—

you—that our honourable house is insulted? Is it you who dare to cast on us nameless aspersions? The girl there, our niece, has sinned grievously, but not in that sort. I must request you to abstain in future from language unbefitting the lips of a woman who is unmarried, and professes to be a Christian."

Miss Julia let fall the few tears she had at hand, and felt a vague sense of injury. Truly this was turning the tables with a vengeance! For months past, Margaret had been prayed and groaned for, night and morning, under the style and title of the unhappy saint, who was now tabooed the family councils and an unmarried Christian's lips. She slowly wiped her eyes, and looked perplexedly at Katherine, whose gaze was still fastened fiercely on Margaret. Then her eyes followed her sister's, and she understood hazedly that sister's wayward wrath. She came forward timidly and looked up into Margaret's eyes; then she drew her into her poor, shrivelled breast, and kissed her, straining her tight, and altogether astonishing herself.

Miss Dering shuddered behind their backs, and sat down cold, with a most unpleasing conviction of sin. For, in spite of the girl's hat and her pretty frock, and the subtle, indefinite charm of every bit of her—in spite of all these indications of Satan's wedge, Miss Dering knew that in the prayers and illustrations of many months she had done something uncomfortably like desecrating a shrine—doing violence to a Holy of Holies.

When Margaret recovered her person and her wits from Miss Julia's embrace, a mixture of duty and inclination induced her to go and bestow a kiss of peace on Miss Katherine. She stooped over her with her mouth ready budded to a kiss, offering a rare contrast to its grim task. But Miss Katherine started back hurriedly, thrusting out her hand as a defence.

"Don't!" she whispered hoarsely. "Go, girl, go!"

She stood up the next moment and left the room. Margaret felt dejected and forlorn, as if she were back in her drab frock on her road to a prayer meeting. In the uncom-

fortable pause, her aunt Julia suggested that she should go to her room, and they went up together. To her amazement, it was ready, swept and garnished, with new rose-pink curtains on the windows, and on the chairs chintz with a little old-fashioned pattern on it of rose-pink flowers. And on the white and rose-trimmed dressing-table there was an old china bowl filled with fresh flowers. Margaret looked round her surprised.

"What have you done to make it look so pretty? Who are you expecting?"

"My dear, for a long time we thought you were dead," Miss Julia explained falteringly, "and then I can hardly tell you how it came to pass, but it seemed as if you still lived, and might one day return to us, and your aunt had the room arranged for you as it now stands. It is always ready, and each day she herself plucks fresh flowers for the table. I should so much like to have helped her," she added, sighing, "but you know your aunt, dear; she prefers herself to do things."

"But she thought I had disgraced you both?"

"Yes, dear, that was a sore tribulation." Miss Julia clutched her handkerchief nervously. "But you were of our own flesh and blood; and, dear Margaret, often, secretly, in my chamber, I thought that perhaps we had not rightly ordered ourselves towards the follies of youth. I have thought at times that your aunt has also felt this," she went on hesitatingly, her cheeks tingling with a faded blush, her head drooping; "but this, as you will know, is but surmise on my part. Katherine is not one to speak aloud of some things, but the Lord knoweth the heart's bitterness."

"I should have come long ago. I am a nasty, selfish wretch!" Margaret cried, catching and hugging her aunt. "See!" she said, "you've taught me to cry. I don't do such a thing in a blue moon. I wonder, if I tried hard enough, if I could teach you to laugh."

Miss Julia gave a little, fleeting smile, just faintly audible.

"No, dear, it's too late," she said, caressing the girl, her

pink-lidded eyes fixed half-fearfully on the radiant brightness of the upturned face. "Many years ago it appeared to me as if it were given to me not to laugh, and, strange now as it may seem to you, Margaret, it was one of my hardest tasks. And now, after my many strivings, there come moments when it is borne in on me that after all I misjudged the Lord's will, and threw away a precious gift. It seems strange, in this earthly dispensation, how frequently consolations resolve themselves into doubts. And now, my niece, prepare for tea. Your aunt, as you will remember, has a strong objection to unpunctuality."

When Margaret had tidied herself, she took a flower from the bowl, kissed it, and put it in her dress.

"The world's going mad altogether," she thought, laughing softly. "Never in my wildest moments could I have imagined kissing a flower because Aunt Katherine's hand had touched it. It's a nice substitute for her bodily hand, anyway, which at least is a consoling consideration."

The tea was refreshing and unexpectedly abundant, and the conversation had in no sort of way altered in tone. Miss Julia had retreated into her shell, and Miss Katherine had put on her best robes of righteousness. Hannah's excitement now and again showed itself in insisting grimly on Margaret's acceptance of choice morsels, for which officiousness she received, during the course of the meal, three several snubs from her mistress.

When they went back to the library, Margaret sat down near Miss Katherine, and told her simply why she had gone, and what she had done during her absence. Once, in a little rush of forlornness, she put her hand on Miss Katherine's knee, but the knee shrank from her. When she mentioned Poll and her kind, both the women started visibly. As she went on, Miss Dering drew herself up, and into Miss Julia's cheeks there crept her poor, tired old blush. When their niece ceased to speak, they made no audible comment on her story. Miss Dering scowled, Miss Julia wept. Margaret longed for even a word to break the depressing silence, but there wasn't a sign of one. She could hardly breathe

in the strangling atmosphere; besides, it suddenly struck her that it must be after nine o'clock.

"I shall go up the hill," she said. "It's hot to-night."

"The same old habits," muttered Miss Dering, as she went out.

She stood up, and rang for Hannah to light the lamp. When she had gone, the sisters, in unbroken silence, put on their spectacles, and got hold of their Bibles. Miss Julia tried not to sigh, not to look longingly out of the window, or to think of that hug, or try to recall her own old laugh, the sound of which she had almost forgotten.

"There is a change in her," she said at last. "There is another light in her eyes. Perhaps—the Lord is merciful, and varies His means—perhaps she has found grace."

Miss Dering looked at her. "Found grace? Sister Julia, you speak as a fool. She has lost a lover."

Miss Julia wondered sadly why two such different causes should produce the same effect. Miss Dering flung a keen glance at the Bible on her lap; then she walked round the table and reversed it. Miss Julia had been studying the Lamentations of Jeremiah upside-down.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"Do you know it's twenty minutes after nine?" said Rica, out of a bush, when Margaret came up, softly calling.

"Is that all?" she said. "I thought it was the Day of Judgment, and I myself among the goats. Let me breathe air for a minute, and feel human."

"Stretch," said Rica. "It's an immense help in getting the hang of things."

"Come up to the top of the hill. Those yews suck up every breath of air hereabout."

They climbed up and sat down under the copper beech. The moon was nearly in the full, and little silver shafts were shooting in and out among the branches, motionless against the starry sky. There wasn't a stir except that made by a little white owl who was young and foolish, and kept mistaking the moon's rays for the sun's, and in his confusion getting himself whirred against the branches.

Margaret went through the complications of her reception—everything, down to the rose-pink chintz.

"Poor Miss Dering!" Rica said. "But still, it was a frosty house to play prodigal to. At the same time, you're nothing like as dejected as I expected. You've no return of that horrid, intense look that you've been suffering from these last days. It's worse than wrinkles or cloven-hoof. Oh! what's that scent?"

"Woodbine. Don't you see it, white under the moonlight, round that stump?"

There fell a silence on the two. Suddenly Rica said,—

"Are you meditating on your aunts?"

"I had forgotten their existence."

"I thought, by the look of you, you had. I couldn't

imagine any one in such sights, and sounds, and feels, thinking of aunts or devils, or one's soul or any other flesh-thorns. It's too good an hour for thoughts of anything but folly."

"Or Jim."

"Traitor!" she said, throwing her arms back against the smooth trunk. "The terms aren't convertible and you know it. Jim, and the like of him, represent to us, or ought to, the best knowledge, the best joy, the best sweetness, of life, just as we represent all those delightful things to him—or ought to, anyway. The world revolves round Jim and his Jill. If it doesn't, it ought to. It did in the beginning, does now, and evermore should do if things were as they should be."

"Haven't Jims and Jills got a good deal complicated with clothes, and incomes, and shortness of cash?"

"Yes, poor souls, and with worse things than these. We must have our little wants and in the interests of decency we must cover our nakedness. But it's our elders and betters who really handicap us. They give us libellous aliases —'young persons,' 'minxes,' 'girls of periods'; as if a period could be a period without a girl! They irritate Jim against his most precious inheritance; in fact, what he was chiefly created to inherit. They make us into nasty human paradoxes to terrify him. How dare any one frighten a man of a maid?"

"Perhaps it's the fools who are frightened."

"But—hasn't the oracle said it? And though he's forgotten, his verdict is remembered—'Men are mostly fools.' What's the result? Look at the crowds of girls, under thirty by courtesy or fact, as the case may be, each with a smile on her lip, or a tear in her eye, for a lost Jim, who might have been a found one, if the She who for the moment possesses the pulpit hadn't turned her into a text. Imagine marrying a text! All the acuteness and joyousness is taken out of any preached-at person or thing. Wise women of a certain age often seem to me such fools too. When the time comes for a woman and the need of propriety to part company, she can have a most audaciously good time of it.

Instead of seizing this, she frequently devotes her attention to harrying the young of her neighbours."

"Perhaps the young want harrying?"

"They do badly," Rica admitted, with great magnanimity. "That's where it is. We have given ourselves away, and are eating the bitter fruits thereof. We must fight it out, my dear! Give up—what's the first?—tight-lacing, high-heeled shoes? No, that's gone out. What are the last things we're warned against? Drink, is it? No; it's latch-keys and mothers. I think that last may be awkward—only for them, after all, where should we be?"

She sat up and twisted Margaret's astonished face round to catch the moonlight. "I like you better as you are, than if things had gone straight with you," she said. "People would have gone mad for you in your state of nature; now they'll grow sane, which, to my common mind, seems the better part. I distrust madmen; and besides, they're such bores, as a rule."

"I'm doomed to have to listen to preaching from strange pulpits. Caroline, and now you!"

"Caroline?"

"Oh yes, Caroline!"

"Margaret, go on."

She went on, interrupted by divers interruptions. Rica never, on principle, heard a long speech through; it promoted self-consciousness, she considered.

"She had a deplorable habit of truth, that girl. What she wanted was points of view," she said. "Her's was various enough, seemingly, but they all emanated from one part or another of herself: she was her own pivot. But, after all, points of view is what we are all suffering from. They're too high, or too low, or too personal, or too something, or we haven't any to speak of. Yet whenever we set out on the racket, exploring for them, we're apt to take ourselves too desperately seriously, or to go to the devil in some other way. Margaret, there's rushing water somewhere. Come and find it."

If it had been daylight Margaret would perhaps have

lured her the other way; being moonlight, she led her straight to where the brook was singing in its evening gown of spun silver. Rica might not have reached the water, indeed, by quite so straight a path, but that there was that moment a conscious something in the hearts of those girls that made of the two one flesh. They sat down by the stream, taking deep breaths of the woodbine-scented air.

"Margaret," said Rica presently, "I can feel your heart throbbing to-night, and you can feel mine. Tell me what has changed you."

Margaret looked silently into the water.

"I don't know," she said at last. "I think it is perhaps that something has gone out of my love for Geoffrey, and some new thing has come into it. At first, and for long after, it seemed to me, a shameful thing I had to keep constantly crushing out."

"I suppose you were right; a wholesome, well-groomed conscience is an excellent institution."

"But now it's quite different. Don't think," she said, "that this is because of that ghastly loophole of escape Mrs. Hyde offers me. I never think of that except with a shudder." She lifted her little head proudly. "My love is the very best little bit of me; it is sweet, and pure, and holy, and would no more do wrong to Geoffrey, or his wife, or myself, than it would do any other mean, shabby thing. I think it's because I know that now I can honour my love, that everything is different. And in spite of the misery of life, and the squalor, and sin, and ugliness—in spite of having seen it all from the inside, I can still laugh and rejoice —like the little hills," she added, with a sweet, low laugh.

"Was there ever living woman who did not love a man?" said Rica, breaking into the pause. "The rivers, and the brooks, and the little streams, are our hearts, babbling, rushing, storming, sweeping, or sneaking; shallow and deep, feeble and strong, but all hurrying to their goal, to the immeasurable sea of love. Some are soaked up by marshes, lost in lakes, sucked up by the thirsty earth, drawn up to heaven; not one drop of them ever reaches the ocean.

But they all, each one of them, set out from their springs among the hills with that one intention. Aren't you sorry for the poor arrested drops, turning bitter in their marshes?"

"Dear old Rica!"

"Of course, it's bad to reflect on one's kind much, and to turn it or one's self inside out brings wrinkles, and takes the sweetness and glamour from mysteries. But once in a while it seems to me rather invigorating to consider things generally—to pause, for instance, and realise one's preciousness, one's worth in the social scale; it humbles pride, and makes humility sincere. Caroline is perfectly right, my dear; it is we who should be the rightful sovereigns of the world. On the contrary, look at us and our aliases, all of which we richly deserve. The world is led by young men. We should govern the best parts of young men—ergo, lead them! It is as plain as a pike-staff. We should emulate our rivals, then, and dance towards heaven as they do towards hell, drawing Creation in our train."

Margaret laughed softly.

"I do mean it, Margaret, in my heart. Give me your hand. We're links, you and I, in one big chain that encircles the heart of the world. We—you and I—pretty enough of course, but just flesh-and-blood, every-day girls; we—just ourselves, *us*—are the mothers of mankind, and the mainspring of poetry and literature, and hope, and memory. If we could realise it—but it's so hard to, you see—we should be fearless and good; oh, shouldn't we be good! And then we should work miracles and take our place in Nature, making ourselves worthy of our high calling and making men worthy of us. Margaret, think of what it is to be a girl. Think of longing to be a man, when God has made you a girl. It proclaims you at once as a failure; for, after all, the measure of our rights is the measure of our normal capacity. Think of being, as we should be, the best thing in the dreams of a world—not, as we are now, an odd dream in an odd young man's head. Our lives, if we were worthy of our rights, would be a song,—which is, I think, wrongly quoted, but where's the odds? It expresses one's

stern convictions; and if you're struggling towards your place in Nature, the brain gets addled. It seems to me that failures from too much marriage, or too little, have got altogether too much of the running. We must edge ourselves back again and get some good out of our knowledge, or we might just as well have remained fools. Get down on your knees, Margaret Dering—I can't myself, I'm on the war-path, exhorting—and thank God for having made you a girl, and ask Him to make you a good one, but never, never to forget to leave the foolishness in you—only 'chastened-like,' you know, as befits knowledge."

"Rica, are you crying?"

"Yes. I think it's at the idiotcy of girls. You see, if we could only realise ourselves young, what a time we might have!"

"It's after ten, dear!"

"Margaret, did they give you anything for your tea but bread-and-butter and a chapter?"

"They gave me cold chicken and chops, grilled to a turn. They also planted the Cayenne bottle aggressively under my nose. Cayenne used to be one of the unfulfilled desires of my youthful flesh. I was guarded from it as from all other wiles of Satan. Oddly enough, I only took it to-night to please Aunt Katherine."

"In which lies an allegory for British Matrons."

CHAPTER XLVII.

BEATRICE watched her husband's new keenness of living, and his chuckling appreciation of his own budding powers for harrying men into his way of thinking, with a gentle, breathless delight. His practical, everyday, simple methods in the inception of what seemed to her the most insane of ideas, pleased her enormously. They showed a seriousness, a solidity, that was adorable. But what puzzled her each day more and more was the amusement and gratification that Geoffrey found among the extraordinary people he came across. They were not creatures to be considered apart, in their own place, with a duty to be done to them collectively. They were individuals, who had every one, no matter what his position happened to be, a story worth getting at; and it seemed to Beatrice as if Geoffrey just got at this story to amuse and benefit himself, not in any way with a view to the instruction or advancement of the teller. It was a state of mind out of her reach, but she was pleased and content, and she felt certain that her neck and arms grew plumper. Whether they did or not mattered little. There was that in her face which would have made any man forget the most aggressive pair of salt-cellars yet hollowed. Geoffrey, whenever he looked at his wife, felt truly thankful that he had lived, on the whole, decently, otherwise he could not have endured life in the same house with her. About this time it also occurred to him that he had quite lost the crick in the neck she used invariably to give him.

She was the best sister—cousin—friend—that any mortal man ever had, she was so full of dignity, so simple, so faith-

ful. How unfortunate for them both that she should have chosen wifehood, the one state of life in which she was absolutely impossible!

He went out with a big, sad heart, full of tender longing for the little dead girl, who had been made to love and to be beloved.

Geoffrey continued his pleasant prowls around among the population, expanding his notions daily, while codiciling them with modifications and amendments. He was looking forward with glee to an autumn and winter that, between sport and work, must be unflagging. The work "geist" had now fully got hold of him, and the heart of Beatrice swelled with gladness, and a strange new wistfulness, and a stretching out towards her ebbing life.

One day it struck Geoffrey with some force that he was growing stupid. His head felt like lead; his thoughts halted and hobbled, dragging themselves slowly through his brain. He felt incapable of writing an ordinary letter. The power of coherence had left him; proportion no longer kept the balance steady; the most trivial things were assuming a monstrous significance.

"I believe it's the beastly, muggy weather," he told Beatrice. "Thanks be to Heaven we'll be in the country next week."

"Go for a ride," she said.

"I will. I wish you could come. When do you mean to begin riding again? You're surely going to hunt this season? It isn't possible, at your age, that you've lost your pluck."

"I don't think I have," she said, with an odd laugh. "I hope I never may do that. It seems to me such a contemptible thing to permit yourself to do."

"*We* don't do such things, she means," he thought, as he went out. "Poor Beatrice! But, after all, if it's a trifle rigid and limited, '*we* do' and 'we do not' are excellent rules of conduct."

When Geoffrey came in, he felt still more stupid.

"I'll be shot if I'm not getting softening of the brain,"

he said, as he met Colclough, who was just leaving the house. "I feel incapable of the most unskilled labour."

"When are you going out of Town?"

"On Tuesday."

"I'd see a doctor, if I were you. You look a trifle wild and unkempt."

"A doctor always seems to me the last infirmity of noble minds. I'll try a whisky-and-soda first."

Colclough gave a shrug, and went on. There was something about Geoffrey he didn't like; and he felt pretty sure that he would not be able to ward off whatever was coming on him for much longer. He was perfectly right in his surmise. In three days more, Geoffrey's want of coherence was pronounced to be typhoid fever.

Beatrice at first failed to grasp the full bearings of the fact. Geoffrey, considered in connection with illness, seemed to her anomalous—out of nature.

Her first feeling was one of anger, resentment against the undiscriminating fate that should have thrown this stumbling block into the very beginnings of a career. For the only time in her life, Beatrice's thoughts in the matter were for herself, for her own poignant grief and disappointment at this irrational, inexcusable retarding of Geoffrey's progress.

For the moment these feelings filled her, and swallowed up all others.

Of course, his hot, fevered restlessness, his painful weakness, hurt—troubled—surprised her. But what were such things compared to this sudden, incomprehensible check put upon Geoffrey's "making for righteousness"?

There was an air of offended majesty about Beatrice during the first few days of her husband's illness that neither Rica nor Colclough could quite understand, and that struck Geoffrey's half asleep brain oddly whenever his heavy eyes lifted themselves to look at her.

And when, after many days, the preliminary note of fear for the man was struck tremulously, it was not in the heart of the man's wife that it first quivered. She was still

serene, calm, unsuspecting, while already the hearts of all the others were failing them for fear.

In the love of Beatrice for Geoffrey there was something so infinite, so immortal, that, quite unconsciously to herself, she had clothed him in subtle, mystic garments of infinity and immortality. Curiously enough, her husband was to her a god, as well as a man.

When the danger, the fear, was explained to her, and the truth dawned slowly on her consciousness, none but God and some rare, solitary, sad soul could in any sort of way grasp the anguish of this silent, lonely woman. She went to her room directly the doctor had told her the truth. When she came down an hour later it seemed to Rica that she was a new Beatrice. She had grown defiant, resolved, aggressive. Her nostrils rose and fell excitedly; her eyes shone with a steady fire; her voice had taken on a fine tone of command; her gentle, passive ways had vanished. She was eager, compelling, full of resources.

She took on herself nearly the whole nursing of Geoffrey. In spite of every remonstrance, she refused to leave him night or day. If she slept, she slept in her chair beside his bed.

It was a dreadful thing to watch this poor woman at bay in her dumb, breathless fight with Death.

And it appeared as if she were about to have her reward. One day, Geoffrey's semi-dormant senses seemed to gather and concentrate themselves on her, clinging, in a sort of half-comprehending eagerness, to her every look and her every movement.

To Rica and Jim, who hardly left the house all this time, it looked as if the sick man were drinking in greedily the extraordinary luminous vitality of the metamorphosed woman. He groped out thirstily towards her, and lived by absorbing her life.

Beatrice's joy was a strained and silent thing; but into her eyes there would now and again leap a flame of brilliant triumph, turning to tongues of fire the patient prayer in them.

One day, Geoffrey began to murmur little soft, sweet words of love. Beatrice stooped over him to listen happily. She put out her hand, and he laid his feebly on it. First it was just little general, short words, and confused snatches of love, with no name; then a tender silence, while he feebly patted her trembling hand.

All at once he turned his eyes on her, and searched her face curiously. The pleasure and the peace gradually left his, and his eyes grew grave and troubled. He withdrew them from their baffled inspection, and let them wander far into a sad, vague distance. "Margaret, my own, my love, my sweetest!" he whispered. "Oh, Margaret, Margaret mine——"

Beatrice stood rigid and wan, and still he whispered, in the sweet habit of love, soft, senseless things for Margaret's ears, touching lingeringly the hand of the other, now grown stiff and cold. Suddenly he shivered and drew his hand away. The minute after he opened his eyes intelligently and looked at Beatrice shuddering above him. A flash of strange, poignant pain shot into his eyes; they clouded slowly, and with a low, stifled moan, as of a soul bruised, he turned tiredly away from her.

Beatrice sat on palely, and in weary anguish she reflected on the truth.

When Geoffrey awoke from his restless half-slumber, he was a different person. His eager striving for life had left him. In its place there had fallen on him the pall of apathy. He no longer raised his eyes to follow and rest on Beatrice's movements; they seemed to lie like marble under their lids, while he lay in listless indifference and waited. Ever and anon, a half-wistful, half-mocking smile would move his dry, cracked lips, and burn another little seam into Beatrice's poor tortured heart.

The doctor could neither understand nor account for the inexplicable change in the man, and the two he called in to help him were as incapable of solving the riddle.

After a long consultation, he told Beatrice of the hopelessness of the trio. She was an agreeable person to break

news to, the plane on which she stood was so far exalted above that on which hysterics find a foothold.

Nevertheless, he was exceedingly sorry.

"Mrs. Hyde," he said gently, "you have done wonders, but you can't work miracles."

She looked at him in silence, and dismissed him with a gracious, speechless gesture. When he had gone, she put her hand slowly to her forehead. "Love can work miracles," she said aloud, "but it must be the sort of love a man is capable of understanding." She stood up, and went towards the door, but her feet seemed to slip away from her. She faltered and swayed, and the bitter pain caught her in its teeth and tore her. She had just sense enough to get to the sofa and lie down. For some eternal minutes she lay there, and fought doggedly for her life. She knew it was slipping from her fingers, that it would eludé her, and escape through them if she relaxed for a single second her vigilant grasp on it. She clung on steadily, desperately, with infinite weariness, for her whole soul was swept up in one great longing to let go, once and for ever, and to plunge gladly, joyously, into the rest that awaited her—to taste of that peace that passeth all understanding; for these things were quite true and real to this woman, who believed. But the time was not yet; there still remained a little work for her to do. Long after she had got hold again of her shrinking thread of life, she lay still, and thought; then she arose slowly, rang for her maid, and ordered her carriage.

She looked at Geoffrey lying moveless, with dull, deadened, indifferent eyes; asked Rica, who was distinctly astonished at her proceedings, and her failure to explain things, not to leave him, and gave the nurse a few gentle directions; then she went out, telling the coachman—to his hardly concealed amazement—to drive to the house in which Margaret lived. Such a neighbourhood seemed strangely out of harmony with such a mistress as his.

Before she reached her destination, Beatrice had gone through a miserable little skirmish with her habitual reticence. When the footman—a kindly young countryman,

who spent much of his spare time whimpering unaffectedly for his master,—to whom every soul in his service was devoted—came to open the door, Beatrice said to him, with quiet constraint,—

"I am going into this house, and hope to bring home with me a young lady, a dear friend of mine, who lives here merely that she may do good to the poor people about. I think if she will help me nursing your master that it may be of great benefit to him."

"They may remember her, and know," she thought, feeling very cold about the heart; "but she will come to the house as my friend, and they will think of her afterwards as such. Then there will be no loss of dignity to any of the three of us."

When Margaret heard and understood, she made one supreme effort to emulate the woman who told her; but she was as yet a little too young for such magnificent serenity. One poor cry of agony broke from her, and she hid her face in her hands.

When Mrs. Bent brought in her hat and cape, it was Beatrice who helped her on with them.

Poll coming home, half an hour later, found Mrs. Bent crying noiselessly, by the rays of dying embers in the grate, with scanty, difficult tears.

She had begun by crying for the sorrows of Margaret and the poor young madam, but now it was herself she thought of—herself in a lonely old age. In past imaginings this had never struck her with any terror or especial uneasiness. She had a competency. No howling wilderness of a workhouse loomed before her. The desolation of loneliness would come, in the usual dull course of events—old age must come to all, and it was always lonely. But the sudden going away of Margaret had fallen as a bolt from the blue, crashing into Mrs. Bent's understanding and breaking, as it were, great gaps into it, through which strange new lights shone.

She imparted, in her lonely craving for sympathy, some of her sensations to Poll. The words were inadequate,

maimed, but somehow they impressed her more than a multiplicity of adjectives and fine-turned sentences could have done. She, in her turn, flopped down on a chair, and tumbled straightway into inconsolability.

"I knew it all along," she averred—"sooner or later 'e'd come, and no more of 'er for us after that."

"Poll, girl, the poor young man is a-dyin'."

"Dyin', bless yer!" said Poll savagely. "Not 'e! No sech luck!"

"Miss Margaret ain't gone for good," Mrs. Bent explained.

"Maybe not, but 'twon't never be the same no more," she retorted obstinately. "She won't b'long to us never no more, like she did."

"Poll, do you think Miss Margaret's heart's the one to grow cold to us? I couldn't ha' believed you were that ignorant."

"Ignorant yer granny!" muttered Poll angrily. "I tell yer 'twon't never be the same."

The girl's abject, hopeless grief distressed Mrs. Bent, it was uncommonly like her own, except for the rudeness of its quality. It was hard to speak comfort. To stop the inevitable gap, it occurred to her that a word in season might come handy.

"Poll," she said gently, "we have the Lord."

Poll snorted. "No doubt! But," she cried, with a fresh burst of tears, "wot's 'E, to 'er? 'E's too blessed far off, bless yer. We wants sutthin' we can look at, and watch, and that'll keep a nice friendly-like eye on us, an' sort o' cotton to us. I tell yer the Lord ain't a patch on Miss Margaret for that. Wot do the likes o' 'Im, or you either, know o' bein' bad? Bein' good comes in yer day's work. Y'avent nothin' else to do, and no wishes agen it. But us—oh, Lor'! it's mortial 'ard to be good, and without 'er, bless yer—I don't want ter be good without 'er a watchin' on me."

There was a dull, heavy pain in the round, red face that touched Mrs. Bent to the quick. For the first time since she had known her, she felt a warm glow of tenderness go out

towards Poll. The motherliness that had so long waited in vain for Nancy, seemed suddenly to concentrate in her, and to yearn to make of itself a garment wherewith to cover the poor rents of Poll.

"Poll," she said, in a low, quavering voice, "Miss Margaret ain't the one to give us up, or her work up, ever. She'll come back, child, the same as she have gone—the same as she'll be till her hour o' death. But we can't expect to keep her nigh us allays. Her place is set a vast higher nor our'n, and one day her'll be set in it. I think, girl, you and me had better make shift to take up with one another. From now you'd as well be my daughter, and I'll mother you."

"Lor' a mussy, Mrs. Bent!"

"An' Poll," said Mrs. Bent, with the air of melancholy but fixed resolve, "when Miss Margaret goes from us, we'll keep on gatherin' them critturs, and see what's to be done with 'em. Arter all, neither you nor me is that delicate we can't stomach 'em now and agen."

Poll giggled frankly through her tears.

"You and me! W'y," she ejaculated, "'E'vens!"

Mrs. Bent lifted her head stiffly. Now that she had decided to mother the hussy, she felt in conscience bound to put her in the same box as herself, nominally, anyway, but there was no denying it, to the very end of her days the girl would be a sore trial. "Well, belike the Lord may temper the wind," she thought resignedly, observing severely, "Poll, the young minister will countenance us, I make no doubt, and I trust your conduct may be such as to meet his approvin' eye. And I happen to be aware that Miss Margaret have no intentions to desert us."

A horrid, furtive look of fear again overspread Poll's face.

"'Twon't never be the same," she muttered, and broke out into a modulated roar. "'Er understood the bloomin' grind it were to be good, 'er did. The Lord 'E don't, 'E's too 'igh in 'Isself; and Mrs. Bent—laws, ye'r too old!"

"Poll, girl, I was young once, and some things came

hard. I'll strive to forget my age, girl, and think only o' your foolishness."

"Will yer?" said Poll, looking eagerly at her. "Will yer now? That's wot 'elps such as us."

. . . . . .

Beatrice, meanwhile, was watching Margaret's effect on her husband with strange, mixed anguish. Her heart was desolate, shrouded in black loneliness, since she had cast out from it the last dream with which she had deceived it. And yet she was sustained by an exaltation of holy joy, which shone out over her sad face; and her presence, to the loving, pitying eyes who watched her, was as a benediction.

Her surmise was quite correct. Love does work miracles, when it is the sort of love a man can understand.

The touch of Margaret stirred some deep-lying, deadened nerve-centres in Geoffrey. Slowly, minute by minute, bit by bit, his old striving for life returned to him. Blindly, uncomprehendingly, but unerringly, because the magnet which drew him was as true as God, and immortal, he answered Margaret's every demand on him, roused himself at her call to each fresh effort, groping every moment more surely towards life; always murmuring her name, and waiting on her touch.

It seemed to Margaret that no woman ever loved a man as she loved Geoffrey. But as she was cherishing this thought, softly stroking his fingers the while, she chanced to look up and to find Beatrice's unreproaching, gentle eyes watching her out of the shadows.

Then she knew, by a sudden flash of insight, that the love of this woman was a hundredfold more mighty even than hers, for it was absolute, knit up into years of anguish, with no hope of reward, either in time or in eternity.

From that minute a strange wonder came to her. It was the quick welling-up in her heart of a worshipful, tender, thrilling adoration for this woman who had loved so nobly and so vainly; and this simple, newborn love seemed to her often a thing even more desirable and sanctified than her love for Geoffrey—the very crown of her existence—the

talisman that had revealed to her God in every heart of man.

A few days later, Geoffrey's eyes began to clear and grow sane and steady, and the doctors were jubilant over their skill and success. When they had spoken with Beatrice, and gone away, Margaret asked Rica to stay with Geoffrey, and herself went and knocked at the door of Beatrice's room. She had never ventured near it before, and she felt half choked and stifled.

Beatrice gave an involuntary little stir of surprise at sight of her.

"Mrs. Hyde," she said, in a low, hurried voice, "Geoffrey is now quite out of danger. I am going home."

Beatrice started.

"For every possible reason, of course, it's you he must see and recognise—not me. The sight of me, now that he will be able to know and think, would only distract him, and put him back."

Beatrice grew paler, but she gave a low sigh of relief. She had forgotten some possible result of this contingency, in her great fear. There still remained to her one tiny dream-shred in which she could once more wrap her heart, and comfort its exceeding coldness.

"And," Margaret began, but she broke off quickly. Speech between these two women was a thing always to ward off, to hold at arm's length, it had been made so impossible for them. And yet the thought that this was the last time they should ever look on one another, those two, whom a great love had so curiously divided and bound, struck them simultaneously.

Beatrice stood up. Margaret stopped as she was walking to the door, and turned round, and they looked in each other's eyes as they had done the first day they had met.

"Beatrice," Margaret said, in an odd, shy way, blushing hotly. "I can't quite tell you how much I love you, or the strange sort of love it is. I wish"—she had to stop to swallow a painful, choking lump of embarrassment—"I wish *you*'d let me kiss you."

Beatrice stretched out her arms silently, and took the girl into them.

. . . . . .

A few weeks later, Geoffrey was sufficiently convalescent to make it possible for them to go down to the country; and now Rica, who went with them, was a good deal more anxious about Beatrice than she was about him.

Beatrice seemed to her to be supported and sustained by some hidden spiritual excitement so delicate and essential that it never produced any outward effect of hurry or fever; it just gently blew on, and kept alight in her, her little flickering spark of life.

There was in these days a liquid brightness in the eyes of Beatrice—an illuminated look about her altogether. Her heart and senses seemed to have leapt out into a new freedom, and to glow with a delicate new glory in the delight of their emancipation. All these things made Geoffrey's wife an eminently sweet and worshipful woman. Geoffrey's heart was moved strangely towards her.

The blessed, dim memories of Margaret that still hung about him like incense, entrancing his senses, he began to connect with the presence of Beatrice, not with that of the dead girl. Beatrice gradually took shape in his mind as the fleeting vision he had watched in his sickness, who had hovered for ever about him, gathering up for him the life that was slipping away, then breathing it again into his soul, and with it the fulness of her own life.

She had saved him; of that there was no doubt. All through the very darkest hours of his brain, he had known that she meant to save him. And she had succeeded.

Yet still there was an odd contradiction somewhere, a disturbing mystery, primed with pain; and whenever he was away from the rest-compelling presence of Beatrice, this mystery irritated and troubled him.

One day he came in from a ride, and went, as usual, to the drawing-room; but she was not there. Then he went to her own room, and to his surprise he found her lying on the sofa in an abandoned, effortless way, altogether out of her

habit. There was a pathetic suggestion of helplessness in her attitude, as of a vine cut down at the roots, still green and blooming, but waiting in gentle patience until the sun and the winds should accomplish its inevitable end.

It was this waiting look about her that frightened him. There was none of that readjustment of herself to new conditions that had of late been so charming, and had impressed him a good deal with the latent suppleness of youth in her—a delicious suggestion, in which, up to these last few weeks, she had been oddly deficient. A disagreeable coldness, a most unaccustomed oppression of silence, fell on Geoffrey.

All the radiant sweetness of the day seemed suddenly to be blotted out before him.

Beatrice looked up at him expectingly. He generally spoke first. Why should he be silent just this moment, when, more than she had ever needed it before, she needed the courage that the mere sound of his dear voice always gave her?

It was just one more of these incomprehensible, almost priggishly consistent protests of life against straight, simple courses. How happy people might be, she thought wistfully, if this restive, wilful, capricious cynicism didn't spoil everything!

"Geoffrey," she said at last, with a short, embarrassed laugh, "I have learnt to lounge, and it's delicious. It has taken me twenty-five years in which to learn this easy lesson. I think, poor old Geoffrey, it would have been better for you if I had learnt it earlier in the day. It's the women to whom lounging comes as natural as their daily bread who make men happy."

"Beatrice," he said, sitting down and taking her hand, "what do you mean, dear?"

"Oh, Geoffrey, I'm so tired, I have been tired now for so long, and I'm resting. Do men ever know anything of this great tiredness, I wonder—such tiredness, I mean, to which even the thought of rest is like a breath from Heaven?"

"Beatrice, dear, what is it? Speak out."

"Geoffrey, I'm going to rest now, rest all the day long, and you have got just to take care of me, and to make my rest sweet."

"Dear Beatrice, dearest, tell me what you mean."

"Ah, poor Geoffrey!" she said, with an odd, consciously-wise look on her face. "I believe you mean it. I believe you think that I really am dearest—my darling—my dearest—my beloved. I am only your cousin, and if I lived by your side for fifty more years—just think," she cried, with a subdued gasp, "think of the accumulated tiredness at the end of them!—I should still be your cousin, dear, but never, ah! never—dearest! Poor Geoffrey, you think it, else you wouldn't say it, dear, simple cousin mine! But you don't know, you know nothing, poor Geoffrey; but I'm going to tell you."

She told him gently, tenderly, nobly, all that there was to tell, while he sat with one hand holding hers, the other supporting his head.

"Isn't it curious," she said at last, "that a life with no eagerness in it, and little comprehension, just full of disturbing commonplaces, should be so tired, should be so tormented by this absorbing thirst for rest?"

Geoffrey lifted his eyes and looked at and past her, out across the moat, over the terraces, through the shaded reds and yellows of the autumn leaves, and on again to the line where the earth and sky met, and still on and on again down the narrowing valley of the years that had been; and as he looked the scales of selfishness fell from his eyes, and for the first time in his life he saw things as they were, and among them, standing out "larger than human," Margaret, and her pure crystal love for him, and Beatrice crowned upon with her spotless diadem of self-sacrifice. All this was focussed in tears; and as his heart warmed and went out after the one, here, in the presence of the other, his head fell forward. He shuddered, but for his intolerable pain he could not speak. In a dazed, semi-conscious way, he said at last, slowly and stupidly, like a man only half recovered from a blow,—

"Is all this inevitable—this illness of yours—our relationship? Are we always to be just cousins only?"

"Geoffrey, haven't I made myself clear, dear love? The 'always' that remains for us is such a mere speck of time—a few days—at most a few weeks. You can't alter your nature and my fate in that time. You couldn't do it in a whole long lifetime, once the opposing impetus was given. Just ordinary friendliness would never have slaked my great thirst. God only gives to a few men the kind of love I asked for, and to these but one heart-full of it."

A sting of sharp pain goaded his dulled, shocked brain into intense keenness of perception. He looked into her face and saw all the bitter loneliness of her past hidden away tenderly behind her quiet eyes. After a pause, heavy with thought, he cried aloud hoarsely,—

"My God, Beatrice, what have I done?"

She laid her cheek softly on his shaking hand.

"You have done nothing, Geoffrey, but make a mistake, and I—I have done nothing—but emphasise it. I hadn't somehow the stuff in me to repair it, to give the one little touch—poor Geoffrey, it only wanted just one little, tiniest touch—that would have turned failure to success. Dear, you don't think I blame you? If there's any blame it's mine. I saw that your heart was nice, and big, and lovable, and that it was only waiting for the hand of a woman to gather, and I prayed to God that He would let mine be the hand. My prayer was granted, and it seems you and your heart got into the wrong hands—nerveless, coward hands, too fearful to take a firm hold of their possession, and to guard it."

"Why do you spare me, Beatrice? Why don't you speak out the truth—tell me that I have been both blind and brutal?"

"I have," she broke in, "had three years to think this all out in, you only a few minutes, so that I know more about it than you can possibly do. Before I married you, I never once asked myself if I were in any one way, except by birth and environment, suited to your needs. I only

knew that you were very dear, and that it would be altogether sweet to be your wife——"

"I had as much right to consider suitability."

"But how could you?" she said, surprised. "At that time you didn't know what love meant. I wasted my time, and Margaret came; that was all. Ours was a marriage in which there was no grasping of its importance, and the result was a misfit."

He tried to say something, but the words were choked in his throat. She laid her wasted hand tenderly on his handsome, sunny head.

"I believe you are in some way blaming yourself, my Geoffrey. I believe I have been clumsy, and have given you the impression that I am bewailing my lot, and feebly railing against an inexorable fate—really no fate at all, but the inevitable result of ignorance." She lifted her head in her old proud way. "I assure you I don't admit myself defeated. I go away with no beaten, shameful feelings, but with my reward in my hands. I have done what I meant to do. I have helped you towards being good, Geoffrey, and to setting your face towards a worthy goal, and I know that—even for my sake—you will never turn back, however much you may stumble."

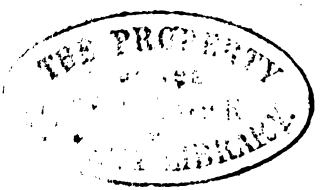
"Oh, my God!" he muttered brokenly. The touch of her hand blessed him, but it pierced his soul as with sharp steel.

"And then, Geoffrey," she went on, with increased earnestness, "is it not a good thing that I have so far killed the littleness in me that I can look forward without an atom of jealousy to your future, and hers—Margaret's—for Margaret is my friend—and know that in your path, right in front of you, there lies radiant happiness, and, better still, success?"

As he lifted his eyes to the transfigured face before him, his heart stood still at the self-abnegation of this woman, at the utter blindness of his past; and with these there ran a feeling of angry protest against the cruel mismanagement of things earthly. And she, feeling the current of thought in him, continued,—

"No, Geoffrey, God's way with us has not been wrong nor cruel. Had you and Margaret come together without this delay, your life would have been wasted, purposeless, barren. And Margaret—have not the years changed her from simply a beautiful girl into a woman worthy of you? And I—I have had my reward, for I have been helped to help you, and let to love you, and——" She paused; and putting his arm with exceeding tenderness around her, and gently drawing her to his breast, he finished the sentence for her with,—

"Love is all, and death is naught."



THE END.